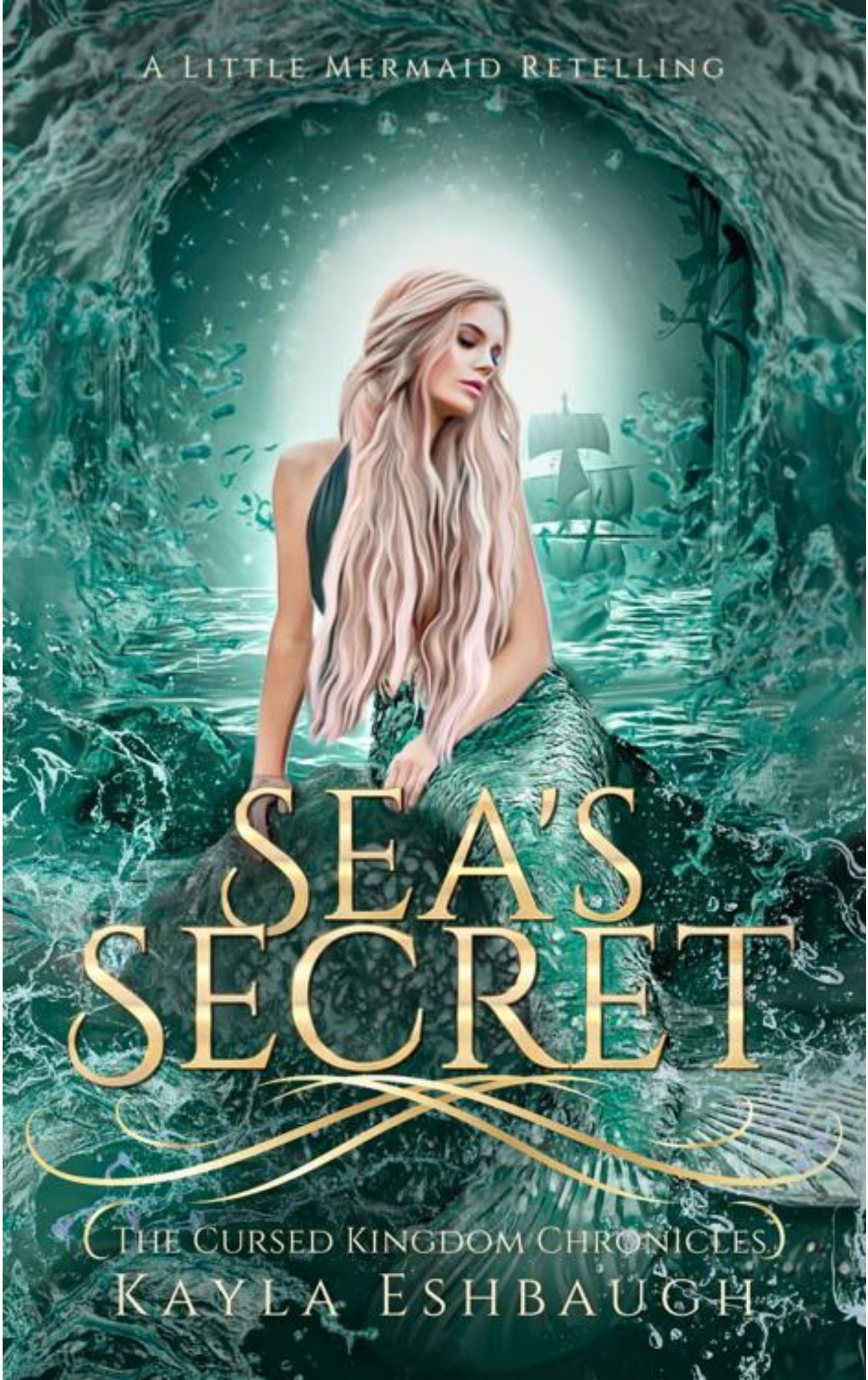
A Little Mermaid Retelling



Sea's Secret

The Cursed Kingdom Chronicles

Kayla Eshbaugh

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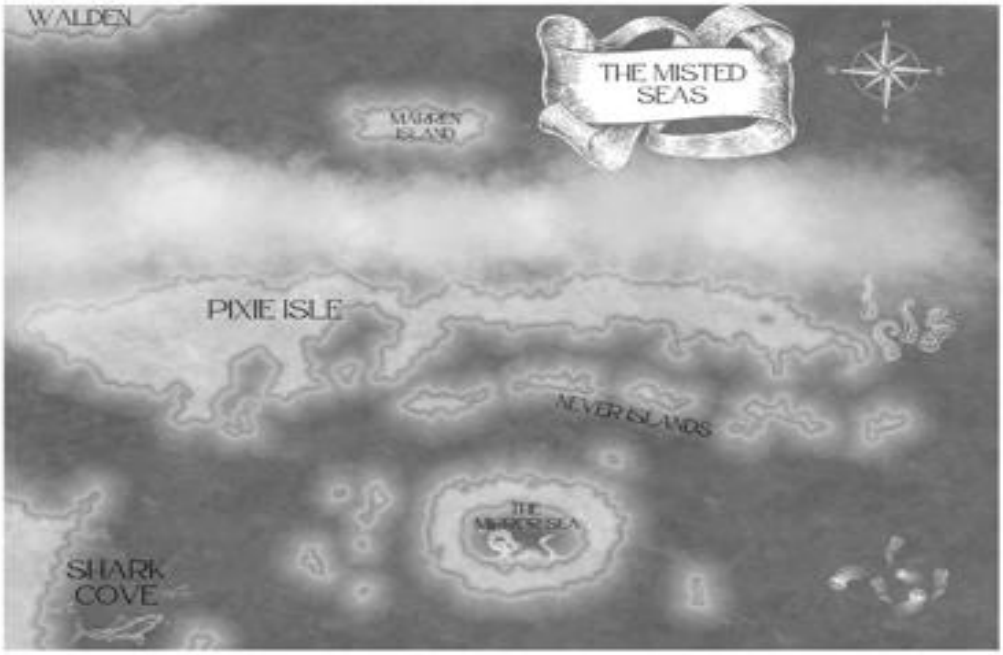
MAPS

ANCIENT LANDS
TOLSTON
HALESTON
TORREN
LOCH
ELYSIEN
THORN
ARCADIA
EMBRA
EASTERN ISLE
VIDRE
RECOLL
SOLEA
LUNE
MAGICAL BEINGS REFUGE
WALDEN
SORRA
THE KINGDOMS OF TERRA
MARMEN


WALDEN
THE MISTED SEAS
MARMEN ISLAND
PIXIE ISLE
NEVER ISLANDS
SHARK COVE

To Jasmine,
Thank you for reading my early drafts and always rooting for me. You are the bestest friend I could ever ask for. I hope Dominick makes you swoon!
Love you!

Series Prologue

Once upon a time, there was a land crafted from magic. From the very sky to the depths of the deepest seas of Terra, magic could be found. Humans and magical beings roamed these lands. Humans raised up kingdoms, multiplied their people, and built grand castles and cities. Magical beings and humans lived in harmony together. There was a specific group of magical beings that cared for every living thing, magical or not. This race blessed all life and helped all to grow and prosper under both the light of the sun and the glow of the moon. They were called the Ancients.

"Ancients" was the name humans gave these magical people, for they were said to have been around from the time the world began. It was believed they could go between worlds, and that they dwelt in the very heavens where the creator lived.

Prosperity grew and wealth was abundant on Terra for a long time. Yet, eventually, every precious gem had been mined and every ounce of gold stripped from the lands. Humans sought after more, searching for other riches and treasures. But the world had given all there was to give. Still, the humans hungered. Eventually, these humans, unsatisfied with all that their world could give them, sought to take the magic for themselves.

The curse upon the ten Kingdoms of Terra all began with *one man,* it is believed—but there were whispers of greed and desire long before that boy's birth. Something had already stirred, perhaps setting the stage for a *traitor* to be born.

In the highest mountains of Haleston, Prince Falcon, at a very young age, fell in love with an Ancient girl, but his love was not returned. Try as he might to win her, she would not marry him—would not love him in return. Prince Falcon grew bitter and hard, and when it was his time to rule his father's kingdom, he made a vow to extinguish all magic from the world.

But not all kingdoms agreed with the traitor, King Falcon. Other kingdoms formed an alliance of their own against him and his followers. There were seven kingdoms who aligned themselves with the traitor king. Four kingdoms pledged their allegiance to the Ancients and three chose no side at all, neither aiding the magical beings, nor the traitors.

Then the great war began. Darkness swept over every kingdom. The very air of Terra seemed to change with such bitter greed and hatred; it became thick and wet. Illness was rampant, causing many to die. The very soil and ground shook in anger at such a betrayal of the ancients who had cared for all life on Terra. Plants would not grow. Water tasted stale. Many human cities, villages, and towns were lost to the storms that raged throughout the lands and to the roaring seas which flooded inland, to the mountains, in rage, swallowing up many betrayers.

War raged on; battles covered every land. The sun grew red, tinted in the blood of the fallen. Everyday, more precious life and lands were destroyed. The blood that saturated the soil, and the death that clung to the air, continued to poison the people, but still, they fought.

Then, when the battle reached the highest mountain peak in the Kingdom of Haleston, where the traitor, King Falcon, ruled, icy winds blew, and an Ancient by the name of Draken fought against the traitor king. There on that mountain, drenched in the blood of both of their people, Draken took the very life out of the king, and vowed that he would curse all the human heirs from all the royal lines. Every kingdom which had betrayed his people, would pay for the blood they had shed.

On his own mountain, the traitor king died with malice and hate still dripping from his lips.

There are other stories, though, other tales of the traitor king. These other tales say that he did not die upon that mountain–no, but that he was transformed. It was said, in some kingdoms, that he turned into darkness itself–into a being which had no light, no form, no shape, but only a mist that destroyed whatever it touched. Others believed that the Ancient, Draken, cast the traitor king inside of the mountain, locking him up deep

within, buried under the weight of what he had done, trapped inside the very soil and rocks which hated him. With his own blood, and that of his people, the oath and vow Draken made was sealed, and the corrupted King was imprisoned forever, in misery.

Despite the different tales of the traitor king, all of the human royalty of Terra *are* cursed upon their birth. Draken, the ancient who stood on that mountain and defeated the traitor king, kept his vow, and he did curse all the heirs of each of the seven kingdoms, who had killed his people, as well as the three other kingdoms who stood with no one. For, not choosing a side, is not knowing what you believe, and some say that the three kingdoms who didn't choose a side in the Great War were worse than the seven who had destroyed the world, because they watched it happen, and yet they did nothing at all.

Chapter One

Dominick

The streets of Thorn smelled different.

Could it be the golden sand?

It was my first time visiting the Kingdom of Thorn, and I believed that the abundance of that unique, golden sand did have a dusty, yet almost floral-like, scent to it. It wasn't unpleasant, only drastically *different* from the salty sea and seaweed smells I was used to. I always missed the sound of the sea's lapping waves, beating on the hull of the ship whenever I was on land.

The sand beetles' clicking in the evening was a comforting percussion of background noise, a sound I needed, because silence was painful.

I watched Sands' back as he guided me down the sandy streets, weaving in and out like the currents of the sea. His black hair was just long enough to pull back and tie up with some twine, although it wasn't noticeable from the front, for his hair still fell over his face. His small ponytail was incredibly useless. I wondered if he only kept it because he knew how much

I hated it. Whatever his reason, it made my lips twitch upward, and I shook my head as I followed him.

Before Sands entered my life, I was not sure what would become of me. With him around, my life finally became bearable. Not only did I trust Sands with my life, we agreed on most things. Even though we remained pirates aboard the dreadful Captain Veeto's ship, we both hated it because being on board the Crimson Blade was like being a slave to it. We both wanted to escape, but we understood that we could only escape with a well thought out plan.

We were working on that.

We wove through the streets of Thorn within the shadows of buildings, under the moonlight. Thorn was a true desert kingdom with no trees swaying in the wind and very little vegetation. I'd heard that Reoll and Sorra, two blessed kingdoms near Thorn, were very similar in their climates and landscapes. Although the Crimson Blade had traveled to both of those kingdoms a few times, I'd never been permitted to go ashore.

Sands kicked up dust as I inhaled, and it caused my throat to burn.

"It's so sandy and dusty here," I coughed.

"Isn't it grand?" Sands asked, looking over his shoulder at me.

"It's dry," I grunted, my throat in desperate need of moisture.

"Yes, so?" Sands asked, still leading us on. Our voices were low, and we tried to stay out of sight as much as possible.

"I don't like it."

"Well, I don't remember asking you," he grunted.

"What? *You* like this?"

"It reminds me of home," Sands said, stopping so abruptly that I almost ran into his back.

"What are you stopping for?" I asked in irritation.

"I thought I heard someone," he said, then began walking again. I kept up with his pace, and we were silently moving about the streets once more.

I was only allowed to step foot on land when ordered to. For years, I told myself I did not mind because I was comfortable aboard the ship. That was true, somewhat. I did love so many things about sailing, but I hated being part of Veeto's crew.

I frowned. I hated being controlled. It gave me no real hope for a will of my own, but when Sands became a crew member, he showed me a way to defy Veeto even more than I already had.

Sands finally stopped in front of a small, dusty, golden sand-ridden, stone home. Most of the buildings and the homes in Thorn were made from the same stone.

"Don't frown yet," Sands said with a laugh. I snapped my eyes toward him with a side smirk.

"I was thinking of our *beloved* captain," I said with a grunt.

"Ah, why did you have to go and do that? Ruins the entire night of rebelry," he said.

"It's revelry; 'rebelry' is *not* a word."

"I'm making it a word. It's what we do, after all, and it deserves to be a word."

Sands knocked, and I waited behind him, preparing myself. It wasn't that I was not ready, as I'd done what I was about to do that night several hundred times before, and doing it was the only way I could survive waking up each morning. But still, it was painful. In my head, I believed that if I could just help as many people as I tortured, the good would cancel out the bad.

An older man opened the door with a look of pure happiness upon his tanned face, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

"The Hand! You really came! Welcome, welcome, please come in!" the man nearly shouted.

"Do you want all of Thorn coming?" Sands asked, looking this way and that, down the street.

The man covered his mouth with his hand as he bowed and then opened the door wide for us.

"So sorry. Thank you for coming. I had no hope–"

"You understand that The Hand cannot *heal*?" I asked as we walked inside, and the man closed the door behind us.

"I was told that the *gift* takes away pain. I think that if she were without the pain, she would have the will to live, to get better."

"It is not a *gift*," I grunted at the man before I caught myself. I tried to be more gentle with the people I helped, but it was hard to be gentle when I was not a gentle person. I had been formed to be rough, cold, and harsh.

"Sorry, but I am grateful. You bless all of these suffering people. You are a blessing from the Ancients."

I understood, of course, why people thought that, but I hated that anyone would assume that I was a great blessing. I was a wicked pirate, and if they

only knew of the things I'd done, they would never have praised me. But I kept silent about all of that.

"Let them have some hero to hope for, even if their hero has your face," Sands always told me. *"Just let them believe what they will. Everyone needs some good; it helps us in hard times to have hope in someone,"* Sands said when we first began to visit with those in pain.

Among the peasants within nearly every kingdom near a port, my name was known. I never expected my deeds to travel so fast and so far, but they had. I even met a few people who had figured out that I was actually Prince Dominick. Like in Embra, when I was there for the Princess Tourney, I helped many people. Sands always pretended to be my servant, and we tried to be discreet, but we had been discovered. Luckily, we convinced the people there not to reveal my secret. I might have, possibly, threatened them a little, but it was an empty threat, even if they did not know it. If Veeto ever discovered that I had used my curse to *help* people, I had no idea what he would have done to me, but I knew that, at the very least, those few small *freedoms* I had been granted–if they could be called that–would be gone.

"The Hand, he must focus. We will be in and out quickly," Sands said with a nod.

"I am ready." Another lie, because is anyone ever ready to take on someone else's pain *tenfold*? No. And there I was, almost craving to take away their pain and make it my own. Maybe, I liked feeling pain; perhaps, that was why I did it. Glutton for punishment? Then again, maybe, I liked to imagine that I was more than what Veeto and his crew thought I was.

I am stronger than they realize.

There were twelve people inside the small, one-room house. I could tell from the expressions upon their faces that they were all hurting in different ways.

Faces are very telling, I thought.

The man who we were speaking with moved over to a bed. A woman was resting there; her face was wet with sweat, and her eyes were closed, her brown hair spilling around her face in a mess. I walked to her side.

"Your wife?" I asked.

"Yes, she has been quite ill."

“I shall begin,” I said as I knelt beside her bed.

I was not the best with people. I never had been, but that was one reason why Sands was the perfect companion for me. He was very good with people. I slowly took off my black, leather gloves, the gloves that protected the people around me from what my hands could do to them. I looked at the inky, black, spider-webbed veins that traveled up my arms and then branched out all over my body. Whenever I took away another’s pain, their pain remained inside of me, as that inky blackness. It was only a matter of time, I was certain, before it would travel to my face. The black veins had already reached my chest.

I flexed my hands and focused. As I placed my pointer finger gently against the skin of her hand, I felt her pain. It always came slowly, at first, like a small trickle. Then, once I focused on pulling the pain from a person, it all rushed into me. The first few times I did it, it overwhelmed me so much that I collapsed. Over the years, I learned to focus on the pain, focus on it pouring into me and slipping through my veins. I focused on the darkness slowly taking over my body. When I focused on the pain like that, it only took a few minutes to take it away from the suffering person.

I released her hand and stepped back with a slight wobble. Her pain was not the worst pain I’d felt, but whenever a person I helped had an illness, it caused me to feel ill for a few seconds. It passed as Sands placed a hand on my shoulder, grounding me to where we were.

The woman’s eyes opened. She looked at me with shock before turning to the side to look at her husband.

“Dot?” he asked, kneeling beside her, taking her hand in his.

“I feel so much better,” she said.

“Do you feel any pain?”

“No–I think I can endure this,” she smiled.

“Sleep now. You will be well soon,” her husband said.

He then turned to me, and gave me that same look I had seen a hundred times before–*Gratitude.*

“Thank you, thank you so much.”

Every time I got that look from the loved one of a person I helped, I waited to feel something–anything rewarding. Like always, all I felt was pain.

I nodded.

Then one by one, I touched the other people with ailments, taking their pain, tenfold, upon myself.

“Are you sure you want to keep doing so many at one session? It cannot be good for you,” Sands asked as we made our way through the streets, back to the palace. Before the night was over, we had one last task to accomplish. I’d already had Sands help me rob the kingdom of just enough valuables so that it would not be noticed, yet just enough to please Veeto.

Sands could steal anything without being caught. I once witnessed him speaking with a wealthy lord, for only three minutes, and right before my eyes, I saw him take a golden bracelet, his long chain with a gold pendant, and coins from his pocket.

I believed he got the name *Sands* because he was shifty with those hands of his, like sand. He insisted that it was his real name.

“You know, I am strong enough to handle it.”

“Sure, strong–*insane*, you are something,” he snickered.

“I have to do it.”

“What’s the count now?” Sands asked.

“I am back to being even. Five hundred and forty two,” I said.

“That’s–” he paused, looking at me with those sad eyes of his. Sands was not raised to be a pirate, nor groomed for it as was I. He was raised as a thief, however, and somehow, he kept his light-hearted personality intact through all of the darkness of being a pirate’s prisoner on board the Crimson Blade.

“–A lot of people, I know,” I finished his thought.

“Yeah–well, once we are done with the library tonight, are we headed back to the ship?” Sands asked as we reached my royal guest chambers in Thorn Castle.

The night before was the wedding of Prince Gideon and Princess Briar. I would leave as soon as possible since my royal task had been completed. I hated that I was always helping my mother, the Queen of Walden, when she

had never helped nor cared for me, her own son. But Veeto kept up correspondence with her, for he liked the connection I had to the royals.

"Yes, I have to give passage to The Grimm. Last night, Prince Stephan paid handsomely for The Grimm's safe passage."

"You think Veeto will go for that? I've heard of this *Grimm*, talented swordsman; perhaps, we can get some pointers," he winked. Sands was already an expert with a blade, but it was true that The Grimm was legendary.

"He has to. I have to keep up my *prince* persona. He paid handsomely, and we are headed in that direction," I said with a shrug and stretched out my fisted hands. The tension in them was then released, but I could still feel those peoples' pains, which I had taken upon myself, pulsing through me. It always took a few hours to get rid of the large increase of new pain. Still, there was always lingering hurt, and I'd learned to live with it. There were different levels of pain, though, and I was only at *a four*. Three was the constant, and when I was really lucky and at a level one, there were moments when I would actually smile for no reason, or so Sands had told me the last time I was at a *one* level of pain. When at a *one*, I felt so light. I almost hated feeling that way because knowing how good it could be, made dealing with pain at level eight and higher even more difficult.

"At *a three* yet?" Sands asked. He could always read me well.

"Four still, give me a few more minutes," I said, standing there with my eyes closed.

"It's true, though, Veeto should agree because a prince would assist," Sands said. I opened my eyes a few moments later to watch him pull out a drawer where he stowed his knife and then bent down to place it in his boot.

"Three?" he asked as he looked at me.

I nodded.

"Tell me, what are we stealing, other than whatever gold I find that can fit into my pockets?" he asked with a greedy smile.

He loved gold, like no pirate I had ever known.

"The library here is said to be spilling over with books about magical beings. The royal, Gideon, has a private collection, and I need more information on Marren Island and the mermaids that are said to live there."

"Ah, that's right; he is bookish! Helpful for us," he said with a chuckle.

“Yes, I need information about that island. That could be where my sister is, or somewhere beyond,” I said as I sat down on the bed. I needed to change out of my black attire, and back into my princely clothes before we headed downstairs. I hated acting like a prince. I was not even sure I did a good job of it, but no one seemed to say anything about my behavior, which caused me to believe that a prince could truly get away with almost anything–other than stealing. I was sure that it would have caused a war if the kingdoms ever discovered just how much Sands and I had taken over the years.

“So, anything about mermaids or Marren?”

“I was told that Prince Gideon has the most extensive collection of unique maps in all the kingdoms. I traded for one with Prince Stephan, but I want to see more. He has to have something more than what I have found in other kingdoms. Once inside the library, you will do what you do best.”

“There is *gold* inside the library? Ah, clever—”

“No, there is *no* gold; we need to steal maps.”

“To be clear, stealing maps is not what I do best, but I do understand what you mean,” he smirked.

“What you do best is stealing, and irritating me. You do that very well, also.”

“My, Nick! How you flatter me,” he said with an impish grin.

I held up a finger, pointing it at him.

“And do not flirt with the maid,” I scolded.

“What? She flirted with me. Can I help my dashing rogue looks? No, I cannot, Nick.”

Sands was the only person who ever called me “Nick.” He began doing so when I expressed to him that I hated being called The Cruel Hand, which was my pirate moniker.

“Dashing, rogue looks? Is that the look you are attempting with your barely-existent ponytail?”

“What? Of course, maidens love long hair on a man.”

“I have *never* heard that,” I grunted.

“You don’t ever talk to maidens, so how would you know?”

“I danced in Embra.”

“Yeah, sure, and you were as stiff as a plank. When it comes to maidens, you may not be the best at knowing what they like.”

I rolled my eyes. “Planks are sturdy, and—”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“We should go,” I said with a sigh.

“Mermaid things and maps! I’m ready.”

I’d learned about mermaids, first, from a book I found while at a port. It was a book of sea legends, and I began to wonder, to hope, that they could be real. And an island, which was invisible to all, unless brought to it by a magical being like a mermaid, that island would be a perfect place to hide my lost sister.

And if I ever found my sister, I could then get what I desired.

Revenge.

“Okay. Get yourself dressed, and we’ll be off. Do you think this will take more than an hour?” he asked.

“I hope not. I need to meet Veeto and The Grimm at the dock tonight.”

“Then, I’ll be quick in my thievery.”

“You always are, which is why I keep you around.”

“See, I knew there was a reason,” he said with a smirk and a chuckle.

I waved him off and walked to the dresser where I left my princely clothes. With a sigh, I began to take off the clothing I was wearing and donned a different costume, the one that was the biggest lie, and the one I resented most of all.

Prince Dominick of Walden.

Chapter Two

Meria

I sank to my bedroom floor in front of my mirrored, giant clam shell. I watched from the window of my bedroom as the nearest Marren light flickered off and on–again.

When will it go out completely? How much time do we have left?

Father had always assured us that an Ancient would someday come and cause the lights to burn brighter, but for over fifty years, no Ancient had visited us. The questions I wanted answered were: Why had they forgotten about us? Was it safe above the sea? Was the Traitor King Falcon and his followers still destroying everything? Those questions I had, I only let rattle around in my head, not within my melody that others could hear, because I was not allowed to wonder about such things. To *sing* them? That would be treasonous.

My father, the King of Marren, was strict with the rules that kept me, my family, and all the mer, safe. Sometimes, I thought I would explode, keeping all my feelings and thoughts inside, which was why I was so grateful for Finn, my cousin, who I could trust completely; yet, even so, I

still did not share all my feelings and deep desires with him. He had concerns and worries of his own, as well as a rebellious heart, similar to mine. We could easily converse, and I enjoyed getting some of my fears and concerns off my chest from time to time.

Speaking of Finn? Where is he? I could really use him right now, I thought.

I looked at my rippling reflection. My long, white-blond hair with soft hues of pink floated around me. My eyes, a light blue, were empty of joy. I tried to ignore it, like I did my thoughts and feelings. I knew how to be a good daughter of Marren–and I was determined to do all in my power to be that–to be the opposite of what my mother had been. My soul's melody was singing, but not loud enough to alert anyone of my unease.

As a Princess of Marren, it was required of me to never question how things were done. I needed to simply "be obedient." My sisters were, and I could be, too. I would be. There was no place for my wild questions and imaginings.

As Father always told my sisters and me, "Silence any rebellion that rises inside of you. All is well. Silence, even when you are confused, is what the Ancients ask of us. To be silent and obey."

Silently obey, I urged myself.

Eventually, these wild thoughts that hold me back from true obedience, will end. Perhaps, after today.

I did not often let my melody sing my words, and I only communicated in song when I needed to. I was afraid that if I openly let my melody sing like everyone else did, the *wrong* things would come out. So I became known as reserved and shy. So often, I had to battle within myself and against my own heart.

Silence, that was what the Ancients needed from me. No matter how difficult it was at times, I would still obey. I closed my eyes. *You can do this*, I sang to myself. I turned, hearing movement outside my room, along with Rina's overly happy melody.

"Today, Meria! Edmar will ask to marry you, today!" Rina, my sister, sang, swimming into my room and placing her head on top of mine. I knew that, of course, and it was most likely the reason my heart was extra rebellious that morning.

It would be one of the happiest days of my life–the day Edmar would officially ask me to be his betrothed, although we both already knew it

would happen. I'd known Edmar for my entire life. He was an outstanding mer. He was strong, brave, and loyal to Marren. He worked closely with my father, and it was no surprise to me when my father told me that he was the one chosen as my intended. I, being the youngest daughter in my family, had seen every single one of my sisters bond with their matches and begin their own families. I did not have the confidence, however, knowing my rebellious nature, to find a good match for myself, so I asked my father for help, years before.

I regretted that decision ever since Edmar was the one chosen for me, *but that has to just be a test of my loyalty.* It wasn't that there was anything wrong with him. He was a desirable mer, and I cared about him—but there was something missing, or so my heart reminded me far too often. Perhaps, after we were married, I would feel better. There were many positives to being married, my favorite one being having a family of my very own.

I wanted babies of my own—to be a mother.

We were encouraged in our kingdom to have as many mer babies as possible. My sisters had at least five merlings each, and I adored all my nieces and nephews more than most things under the sea. I often watched them when my sisters were busy with their kingdom duties, but it never felt like a chore.

Even if Edmar turned out not to be the kind of mer I imagined marrying, I told myself over and over again that once we married, I would be one step closer to a family of my own. That was something I was incredibly excited about. I was sure that in time, I would come to love Edmar after we had children because I would be so grateful for them. While not as romantic as some of my sister's love stories, that was okay. *It is okay.* I reminded myself that Edmar was everything a merman should be. It was an honor that he was chosen to be my match.

I was pulled from my thoughts as Rina went on, her melody swirling and rippling around me.

"When I was asked by Dylan, I was so excited. It's been so long, though," she sighed with a slight smile.

It had only been five cycles since they married, not long at all, truly. But I did not want to burst Rina's happiness, just because I was nervous and apprehensive and not overjoyed as she had been on her day.

"What tail dressing are you wearing?" She looked down at my turquoise tail. I always wore a covering over my tail, as my tail was not an honorable

color. Turquoise tails had a negative connotation, which I imagined could have been why I always had traitorous thoughts–because my tail was a traitorous color. I wondered if, perhaps, I was destined to be a traitor, myself; it was, after all, in my blood.

My mother.

No, once you pair with Edmar, you will be free from your rebellious nature, I reminded myself.

"Meria?" she asked again, and I tried to shake my thoughts away.

I hadn't adorned my tail yet with any pearls or shells as was most common when being asked to wed. I was not sure exactly what I should do.

"I'm alright. I will just wear my usual white dressings," I sang, looking down at my undressed tail as it sparkled in the light of the palace. I felt traitorous for liking the way it sparkled in the dimming Marren Lights.

"Don't be modest! We should ask Pearl if you can use her pearls. They would look lovely over top of the white!"

I shrugged.

The "pearls" Rina had mentioned were from Darren, my other sister's husband. He gifted her a long string of pink dress pearls for her tail on their wedding day. It was the most exquisite set of pearls we'd ever seen.

"She's your sister; she can share," Rina sang with a swipe of her hand.

I didn't really want to adorn my tail with someone else's gift.

"Actually, wait! We should ask Coral if you could wear her abalone strand. They have a blue hue that hints at your tail, but not being–"

Traitorous. She wouldn't sing it, but I knew what she was thinking.

Coral popped her head into my bedroom like an eel from a rock crevice, her melody singing that she was excited for me.

"I heard my name." Coral with her red hair and purple tail swished into my room.

"Meria wanted to use your abalone strand for today," Rina sang.

"Oh! Those would look so lovely on you! I'll go grab them!" With a flip of her fin, she was out the door with a slosh of bubbles in her wake.

"Edmar is so perfect for you, Meria. Truly, father has found the perfect merman for you. Plus, with his red tail, there is no way you will have any merlings with *your* tail color. I heard that somewhere–one of the old mer, I think."

"That is nice," I sang with a nod, looking down at my shimmering tail. Even though I knew I should not like the color, I had always thought it was

beautiful. Another traitorous thought. My tail matched the sea, and the sea was the most beautiful thing; it gave us life. I pushed the traitorous thought back and looked at Rina. She was still singing to me.

"Maybe, be sure to sing a bit more when with him? Make sure he knows of your affection. Father and us, we know how to read your melody even when you don't directly sing to us, but Edmar will need more encouragement. Especially today, okay?"

"I *sing* to him," I sang softly.

"Of course, I'm just saying be sure to share your excitement with him when he asks you to marry."

I nodded, unsure of what the right thing to respond would be. I always felt unsure, which is another reason I remained silent. Rina was the sister closest to me in age, and we were the closest out of all my siblings. She always meant well, even when her words hurt me. I could not expect her to sing anything different. The yearning I had for someone to find my tail beautiful, to believe that I was unique and important, and that I was not horrible for having all those inappropriate thoughts swarming within my mind, was so constant. But I should have been grateful. I was a Princess of Marren, and I was going to be matched with the most desirable merman in all the seas.

I really needed to see Finn, and soon. I needed his comfort.

I will have a family soon–little merlings of my own. This is worth that, I told myself.

Edmar was one cycle older than I was, yet we had been in the same classes and social schools. We swam in the same crowd, and over the cycles, we became friends. With his dark hair, the color of the most vibrant orange coral and his beautiful red tail, he was such a strong and powerful merman, and incredibly striking.

I am lucky–blessed. My children will not have this tail color. He is a good match.

That evening, when the tides changed, we would all swim to the surface under the half moon to celebrate upon the rocks surrounding Marren Island. It was the only reason we ever rose out of the sea. It was customary for proposals and matches to happen under the half moon, during the tide change celebration, and I had *finally* come of age, eighteen cycles old. I'd never been above the sea before, and I often wondered what the moon looked like up there—what air felt like.

“I can see how much you love him,” Rina sang, touching my hair and beginning to comb out a small section.

“You can?” I was surprised.

“Yes! Of course. I know you are shy, but you cannot deny the energy coursing between you two!”

I *loved* Edmar? Perhaps, I did. When he was near, I felt *different*. Was that love? Perhaps, I was in love and did not realize it. Perhaps, when we would kiss for the first time that evening, I would feel the love Rina said she saw. My sisters always sang about their first kisses being very important between them and their husbands.

“What about the kiss?” I asked Rina, tentatively. It was customary that once a proposal of marriage was offered, you accepted it with a kiss. It would be my first kiss. While I had looked forward to falling in love and kissing a merman, I did not believe that I loved Edmar. But, perhaps, I did. I was comfortable around him. There was a steadiness to him that I did appreciate, and he was attentive and kind. Edmar was dependable and obedient. I did love that. Perhaps, it was different for my sisters, but I could love him for that, and for the future children we would be blessed with.

Children of my own.

I smiled.

“See! You are practically glowing!” Rina sang, dreamily. “How adorable!”

For years, I had heard all my older sisters’ stories. They spoke of feeling bubbles in their stomachs when holding hands while courting and having long conversations and kissing. Edmar and I were different, but I had come to understand that I appreciated how steady and dependable our relationship was. And *bubbles in the stomach* sounded miserable.

“Rina—”

“He adores you. I have no doubt he will kiss you well. Everyone can see how he cares for you. Only let the fear of first kiss jitters be a small ripple in your pool, and you’ll be fine.”

I was grateful for Rina.

“Have you chosen who you want to take *her* place?” Rina asked, her face turned away from me.

Her. That was all we ever called her–our banished mother who had betrayed our people. I had no memory of her because she was banished

before I'd even finished my first life cycle. That was all I knew–that, and that I had her exact tail color.

My mother—she was the reason I had to hide my disgraceful tail. My mother's tail had once been unique, something special, but after she was banished, the tail color I inherited from her served to remind everyone of the Queen who had abandoned her people.

"You," I sang, looking at Rina.

"I'll gladly fill in at your wedding! I am sorry you never knew *her*–while she has done horrible things, she was beautiful." My heart felt heavy. I could not help the fact I had never known my mother, yet whenever my sisters spoke of her, it always made me sad. I told myself I should not be sad. My mother had betrayed our people, but something inside of me longed for her.

Rina started playing with my hair again.

"I remember when you were born. She loved you so much and held you constantly. She was proud you shared her tail color. I am sorry that you have it, though," she sang. It was not her fault, but I appreciated her kindness anyway.

"I don't want to think about her, Rina."

She nodded and stopped playing with my hair, letting it all float around me.

"Tonight is going to be so magical!" Rina sang, changing the tone of the conversation back to excitement again.

I tried to calm my traitorous thoughts of wishing my mother was still with us and that I could know more about her, and why she had been banished. I needed Finn desperately. He always pulled me away from over-thinking.

"Is Finn on duty tonight?" I asked.

"I think so."

"Can you get him?"

"Fine–" Rina sang with a sigh. While Rina was my closest sister, she did not like my closeness to our cousin Finn. Finn was older than me, not by much. We were born during the same cycle, and had been the closest of friends for all our lives, but my sisters thought of him as the little brother, and pest, they never had.

"Finn is a good merman," I reminded her.

"I know he is, but he is just–" she shrugged.

I remembered all the times Finn and I had annoyed my sisters. For some reason, they forgave me, but always remembered Finn as being the irritating one.

“He is so annoying,” she sang, then swam to the entrance to my room. “But because I love *you,* I will fetch him.”

She left, and I watched myself in the mirror.

“Here is the abalone strand,” Coral sang, swimming through my door. The color was a close shade to my tail, which made me happy. I pulled on my white tail covering and then the abalone strand. She kissed me on my cheek once I was done. “You look beautiful, sister.” Then she swam out of my room. Coral was seven years older than me, and like all my sisters, was a mother, so I wondered where her children would be when we were all at the ceremony. I usually watched all my nieces and nephews, but that evening, I would be at the ceremony–although part of me, really would have rather watched the children.

“I heard you needed me?” Finn asked, his familiar melody such a comfort as he swam up to my open door, smiling. His silver tail reflected in the Marren Lights, streaming in through my window. His tanned skin and bright smile brought me peace. His blond hair was always cut short, but still floated around him.

“Finn, I’m not as excited as I thought I would be,” I sang, adjusting the tail dressing.

“That’s because Edmar is boring,” Finn scowled.

“He is not; he's *dependable*.”

“And you want *that* in your husband?”

“Of course–”

“I mean, is that *all* you want?” he asked, swimming over to my window and sitting down next to it.

“I love him.”

“You *think* you love him,” he sang, picking up one of the seashells, sitting on my window ledge. I often collected seashells and had discovered such a wide variety of colors and shapes over the years. I watched as Finn tossed the shell up, then caught it when it sank down.

“Rina just told me that I love him, and I am pretty sure I do.”

“Yes, because *that* sounds like the *right* way to realize you love someone,” he smirked sarcastically.

“Finn, I’m marrying him. I’m sorry *you* don’t like him, but it’s all been planned.”

“And isn’t that awful!?”

“No, I’m grateful. I’m not sure how I could have chosen one from all the mermen if I hadn’t had my father find someone for me.”

“Your heart would guide you,” he answered matter-of-factly. “That’s how love and marriage is supposed to work. That’s how it was for all your sisters. They followed their hearts.”

“We’ve been over this,” I argued. “I needed help. I do not trust myself, and—as a Princess of Marren—”

“Yes, yes, it’s your duty to marry a good merman; I get it. I just want you to be truly happy. You know that I never agreed with your choice to have your father choose someone for you, because I wanted you to find someone —”

“Not boring?” I cut him off. “I know, but not everyone can be like you—seeking out adventure at every turn of the tide.”

“I do love adventure—and if you allowed yourself to think freely, think for yourself, you would realize that you love it, too.”

“Finn—”

“Okay, fine. I will try to do as you ask. I know you try to fight against your rebellious nature, but I would rather have you nurture it. Yet again, not my choice.”

“I’ll be fine. As long as I can have as many merlings as possible and get to care for them.” I paused, thinking about becoming a mother, and *that* caused a warmth to flow through me.

“You're going to be a great mother,” Finn sang with a smile. “I will say, I am very happy for you, there.”

“Thank you, Finn; I need to become more focused. I need to choose to do what is right, instead of doing what I want.”

“Meria, what is right *is* what you want.”

“What I want is to be the best daughter of Marren I can be, even though I often have traitorous desires. Don’t let me down, now, Finn. You have always helped me, and I can’t trust anyone else with my rebellious thoughts.”

There was a long pause.

“I love you, Meria. You are my best friend and my favorite cousin, it's true. So while I’ll never think anyone deserves you, it is true that Edmar,

while boring, is a fine mer in all the ways your father desires."

"Thank you, Finn."

"It's okay to be nervous, though. It's a scary thing because it goes against your soul—"

I glared at him.

"—However, you want to be honorable, and wow—that is admirable." Finn swam from his window seat and hugged me. "The mer of Marren do not deserve such a princess as you." When he pulled away, his smile was forced. I could tell. "Well, that's the best pep talk I can give you. Now, you should probably swim to your merman."

I swam from my room, through the palace passageways, and then into the open water. As I reached the edge of the reef, I looked back toward the castle.

Seeing the castle from the top ledge of the reef was my favorite view in all the ocean. The castle was made from thousands–probably more–of abalone shells, and it gleamed under the large glowing lights that floated above Marren, the Marren Lights, which kept the depths of what would have been a black ocean, light, bright, and beautiful.

We did not know how those lights were put in place, exactly, just that they were given to us from the Ancients. There were all sorts of speculations about what they were made of.

I continued to watch as the lights, again, began to flicker in the water.

Fear shot through me as they continued to flicker and then dimmed a bit more.

We took great care of the lights which we had been given. I turned away from the kingdom and the slowly dimming lights. Father said the Ancients would come and make them shine bright again, but that had never happened.

Is there something else we could do? I wondered.

I wish I had an answer to help the kingdom.

I sped up my pace to reach the celebration, and soon, I saw other mer swimming up to the surface. I had hope that, perhaps, the tides would not only change the ocean water, but that they would also bring change to the Marren Lights, and that the Ancients would finally come and make them shine bright once more.

But I often wondered if there was anything we, ourselves, could do to fix them, if the Ancients wanted us to do something besides just wait. I shoved those thoughts away.

Be silently obedient. All will be well, I told myself as I swam up to the surface for the first time.

Chapter Three

Dominick

"Did ye run a good rig?" Veeto asked as I leaned against a barrel near the docks.

I twirled my knife in my hands, not looking up at him. Sands and I had been incredibly successful. He had already made it back to the ship, while I waited to speak with Veeto.

"*Aye*, I always do," I said with a smirk and a sloppy shift. It was obvious that my speech was never even near as pirate-like as my uncle's. I blamed it on the fact that I had to play the part of the Prince, at times, which was important to Captain Veeto. I was sure he wouldn't agree to anything unless it benefited him in some way. Truly, his question was ridiculous. I had never once been caught. He knew that. I shifted, sloppily again, just like I always did while playing a pirate, another costume I had to wear, but the one that felt more natural than all the others after so many years.

"Are ye already three sheets to the wind? Ye better 'ave acted like a prince," he snarled. He thought I was drunk, but that didn't bother him as much as the possibility of me messing up my role as Prince Dominick. He

did not like my heritage on my mother's side, but because of my lineage, I could gain entrance into royal palaces, which he could never enter. He should have been thanking me; I would not hold my breath for that one, though. I did not need his thanks. All I needed from him was to have him tolerate me, not kill me, until I had escaped from his ship and crew.

And leave it, I would.

"*Aye*, the best prince in all the lands!" I said with a smirk, looking directly at him.

His face twisted into more of a scowl. I acted as if I did not notice the change in his countenance, pretending to adjust the princely jacket I wore.

"If ye were smarter than a barnacle, ye wouldn't 'ave killed me brother, would ye 'ave–aye?" he said with a laugh.

I couldn't even count the number of times he had brought up my father in that way. At first, it was jarring. I was weak back then, but I had become stronger, and at that moment, I felt very strong. But he never needed to know that. I pulled out the small bottle of drink I always kept in my pocket and took a swing. It wasn't a strong drink, though, and it wouldn't chase away the pain at all, but it was important that he, and everyone else, thought it was. Being a drunken pirate was the part, the persona, I kept up when I was around my uncle and his crew.

As I let the *water* slide down my throat, I noticed his smile–a cruel and satisfied smile–upon his lips, showing a rather impressive top row of golden teeth, teeth that Sands wanted to steal, having mentioned it to me dozens of times. Veeto acted like he hated my "drinking," but the truth was, he was satisfied, because he thought I drank because of all the terrible things he said to me. It wasn't; I didn't drink. That smile of his was how I knew I had convinced him of my lies.

Yes, Veeto was my uncle, and my late father's older brother. He had come to the kingdom of Walden, when I was just a lad of eight years. He took me aboard his ship and told me that he would teach me how to sail like my father. Being so young and without a father, when I met my father's brother, I was excited to spend time with him and learn about the sailing life, which my father had loved. Father's death had been difficult for my whole family, but I knew it was even more so for my mother. Before boarding Veeto's ship, I had no idea that leaving my home and going with him would mean I would never return to Walden, nor would I return to my mother and my younger brother, Peter.

“Aye, Cap, you are right,” I finally said although I hated admitting I had killed my father.

What I had done to my father was something to hate, especially because I was his son. I should not have blamed my mother for sending word to my Uncle Veeto, asking him to come and take me away. She told him that the sight of me, because of what I had done, was too painful for her to endure any longer.

When I was a child, I believed that everything was fine between my mother and me. Of course, I hated what had happened between my father and myself, yet I always remembered my mother’s soft words to me one day as I was crying over it.

“It is not your fault. I love you. He loved you.”

She was a better liar than I was, I had come to realize. All those comforting words? The *love* she had shared with me? It had all been a lie. Over time, those memories which I had clung to early on, the ones that caused me to believe that my uncle had lied to me about my mother’s hatred for me, eventually faded. It was obvious that she really hated me.

Could I blame her?

No, but I did blame her for the life I was then living, a life she had sent me off to live with my vile uncle.

“What did ye pilfer?” Veeto asked, scratching his filthy beard as I capped the bottle and put it back in my coat pocket.

I leaned a bit to the left, then to the right, pretending to lose my balance for a moment. “Aye, where is it—” I said, feigning confusion. “It was right here–” I continued as my thoughts raced, filled with those memories that I tried not to dwell upon.

I was sure that if my mother truly loved me, she would have never sent me away with Veeto. No mother or father who loved their child would send them off to live with a villain like him.

Stop. Do not think about her, I tried to force myself.

It had always been like that. Whenever I sent my mother a letter, it always caused me to think too much about her and about my old princely life, missing my younger sister, Layla, as well as my younger brother, Peter. *He would be around seventeen. Does he wonder why I never come back to Walden to visit? I hope he is happy,* I thought.

Stop it, I argued with myself. *That is not my life anymore, even if I pretend every once in a while that it could be. I am not a prince.*

Veeto grunted with irritation at my act. “It’s by ye feet, ye land-lubber!” he scowled, picking up the bag and pulling it over his shoulder.

“Aye! There it is; you had it,” I said with another sloppy movement. “Did you send the letter?” I asked Veeto as he turned to leave.

You are so weak.

“Aye,” he said, looking back over his shoulder at me.

That was the only true weakness I had ever let him know about me. I hated myself for it every single year when I sent my mother another letter. I knew that after eleven long years, she would never write back to me. But something inside me wanted her to know that even though she had ignored me, she still had another son, a son who was out there in the world, doing her bidding. Even if she didn’t send anything back to me, I hoped my letters brought her at least a little pain—a reminder of what she’d done to me, her eldest son.

She sent letters to Veeto, directing me to royal events that she wanted me to attend. I would never have attended any of them if it wasn't for the fact that royals were always wealthy. Veeto had been the one who explained that benefit to me, many years earlier.

I’d been taught by my parents when I was young that lying, stealing, and cheating were wrong.

But what if that was the only way to survive? I was a part of a pirate crew that pillaged and plundered every chance they got. I was among the worst sorts of men imaginable, and I was one of them, and I was very good at being a pirate.

“Not a large bounty,” Veeto snarled, as he dug around within the bag.

“I was watched while in Thorn. Princess Briar is rather observant. Also, we have an addition to the crew.” I was a bit worried about what he would think of that; however, I, of course, feigned confidence.

Veeto turned to look at me.

“Who?”

“Have you ever heard of The Grimm?” I asked with a slight shift of posture, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Aye, I ‘ave; he be that knight from those Torren tournaments?”

“The same. He asked for passage down the Eastern Sea.” I shifted again. “The Sorran port is his destination. I would not have let him come, but he was desperate, and he paid handsomely for it. Plus, while in Sorra, I am certain to find a few golden objects.”

Veeto smiled when I said that; he liked money and treasure as much as any pirate.

Sorra was the land of the Jinn. Not many of the cursed kingdoms even knew that these *Jinn* existed, but we pirates? *We* knew, because where there were Jinn, there was also gold to be found. I knew it was an easy sell as long as Veeto knew we had already been paid a hefty sum with even more gold on the way. That was one of *his* weaknesses, and the one I exploited as often as I could in order to get what I desired. He did not need to know that I took more than half of the treasure for myself, already, and had stashed it away. I was so close to being able to purchase my own ship. In a few years, I would get my own ship and crew, and then I would set off on my own, well, with Sands of course. But first, I wanted to go back to Walden and demand that my mother speak with me, let her see what she had created in me.

I had only one hope at making that happen, short of breaking into her chambers in the middle of the night and forcing her to face me, which would have landed me in the dungeons for certain, and I had no desire to be held prisoner ever again. No, the way I wanted to return to Walden was to bring Layla with me, her precious lost daughter. If I could find my sister, Princess Layla of Walden, and bring her home, my mother would have to speak with me. I had a few things to say to her. And *she* would have to thank me, possibly even apologize. I would let her, and then just turn and walk away. Just as she had done to me.

I smiled. *That will be a sweet revenge*, and it was the only thing I wanted, short of my own ship, and getting as far away as I could from Veeto, of course. His death? That would be wonderful, too. Men like him should not exist.

In time.

"Where is he?" he asked with impatience.

"He's coming later tonight,"

"Stay and wait. I want his coin."

"That is the plan, Captain," I said with a mocking, drunken salute.

I watched as my uncle walked off with the bag of stolen goods over his shoulder. His graying hair looked white in the moonlight. He had a hunch in his back, another weakness I could exploit if needed. However, he was quite deadly, sometimes even without getting his own hands dirty. I had seen him

kill many men for an assortment of reasons. His temper was rather volatile; he told me that my father had been even worse.

I looked down at my black, leather-gloved hands, clenching and unclenching my fists. *Like father, like son.* The jacket I was wearing made me hot, and it itched. I pulled it off, and it felt like I was shedding a layer of skin, a layer I no longer wanted.

After all, I was not Prince Dominick of Walden. I was a dirty, wicked pirate.

Chapter Four

Meria

I breached the surface, looking for Edmar and realized he was near. I looked at his flashing red tail as it shimmered in the moonlight beneath the clear water, and he swam up to me with a smile. Air was so very strange. I had never felt anything *dry* before. I had heard that word, but had never experienced *dry* for myself. It was also strange how my hair stuck to me instead of floating about my head.

“Meria, you look lovely this evening,” Edmar said with a smile. His orange hair was the same shade as the coral near the open sea. I found myself wondering what our children would look like. We would have beautiful children, I was sure.

I was so close to motherhood. I had a merman, and that night, he would ask me to marry, and I would say, “yes,” and then soon thereafter, we would marry; then I would have as many merlings as I could, and for *that*, I couldn't wait. I wanted to see their faces, which would share both my features and Edmar’s, the merman I loved.

You do not love him. Those words echoed within my soul, and I shoved them away. It was love. It had to be.

"Thank you, Edmar. You look dashing this evening, yourself," I sang, but my melody sounded so different above the sea.

He looked at me with a smile.

The moon was so bright above the water, and everything was so clear, even at a great distance. Air was not thick like sea water. How incredible. I couldn't help but smile and breathe in the warm, dry air—the feeling of it filling my lungs was so light, so much lighter than the sea water. I felt like I could float up to the moon if I took in enough air.

There were merpeople all around us. That specific spot where the mer always kept the changing tide celebration was in shallow water, just off a small, uninhabited island. There were large outcroppings of rocks jutting out of the ocean. Many of mer of Marren lay about the rocks to bask in the moonlight, their tails fully submerged. We, of course, were taught to never fully leave the water. I had never seen such a sight before, but had heard it described hundreds of times. It was strange to see drops of water on my skin, and every once in a while, there was movement in the air that brought on a slight chill. I looked around in order to see the rocky island for the first time. It was incredible–so beautiful and dark, but the tall green and brown seaweed plants upon that land were so strange, shifting slightly in the currents of air. I had a deep desire to step onto that island, which was ridiculous because I did not *step*; humans did that. I had a tail.

"You feel the wind?" I heard one mer say to someone to my right. I lifted my hand from the water—*This air current I feel; It is called wind.* It picked up some of my hair as if playing with it. I laughed. How incredible.

Go to the island. The thought began and then persisted.

Go to the island. I tried to shove that intrusive rebellion down deep, where all the other traitorous thoughts accumulated inside of me.

"Let's go over here," Edmar sang, tugging on my arm to lead me to a vacant, medium-sized rock. He climbed partly up, his red tail still in the ocean, but his upper body exposed to the dry air and *wind*. I looked around to see the eyes of many mer, looking over at him with wonder. He truly was a handsome merman. I was truly lucky. "Come on, Meria!" he motioned for me to join him. I pulled myself up beside him with a smile. The rocks above the surface were very similar to ones I'd seen every day under the sea.

My father was resting upon the tallest rock. His loud voice rose above all the mermen and merwomen there, causing a silence, other than the crashing of waves upon the rocks. The sound was so beautiful, something completely new to me. I could have listened to that sound for an entire day.

See, that match with Edmar was already giving me so many blessings– being above the water, seeing Marren Island, and hearing the waves crashing into the rocks and the shore. That beauty must have been blessed by the Ancients.

Although, even if Edmar was not with me, I still would have been allowed to rise, as I am of age. So these blessings are not, particularly, because of him.

Luckily, my fathers voice silenced my thoughts.

"It is the changing of the tides! Welcome and enjoy this time to bask in the light of the half moon. Our people have always worshiped the Creator, and we celebrate His wondrous creation of the moon, by which we live. How grateful we are for the tides!" my father said, opening his mouth. I was surprised, knowing that we could speak above the sea just as humans did, but never before having heard such a thing with my ears.

A roar of cheers from all the mers' mouths sounded.

"Enjoy your evening!" Father called as he turned his head upward to look upon the moon. As the moon reached its exact halfway point in the sky, the water glistened and rippled, and the currents that were moving in one direction changed and flowed in the opposite direction. Many mer splashed about in the water, flipping their tails and jumping out of the water. I smiled. It was so beautiful above the sea with the moon reflecting on the water and my people jumping above the sea, sparkling in the light.

"Meria–" I turned to see Edmar looking at me. He had a gentle but serious smile, and my heart hammered within my chest. He was also opening his mouth like a human; he was speaking instead of singing. I would have to speak also, although I was not sure how to do it.

Is this it? Is he going to ask me to marry him?

My heart would not thump in my chest like this if I did not love him, right?

It had to be what my sisters spoke of. I told myself that even while the feeling I had seemed closer to fear, it was not fear, exactly, and I convinced myself that, perhaps, it was the excitement of being in love that I was feeling.

“We have been courting for some time now, and I think we are incredibly compatible. Would you agree to marry me?” he both said and sang.

Somehow, it wasn't the exact words I thought I would hear. My sisters had talked about claims of love with much emotion when they had been asked. That did not matter, though. Edmar was simpler, that was all. Maybe he was nervous, like I was. All that mattered was that he was going to be my match, and together, we would start our own family. The Creator, and my father, knew what kind of love I needed–Edmar’s. We were simple mer, but simple was still beautiful.

“Y–yes,” I sang back with a sweet smile.

His smile grew wide, and his head dipped down closer to me.

The kiss! It was happening. I tried to make sure I didn’t move an inch. I had waited my whole life for that moment, and I was both terrified and excited. My sisters had spoken about how a first kiss felt so warm and wonderful. Rina said that she felt like her insides were being tickled by hundreds of bubbles. So far, I felt only nervousness and that strange fear-like feeling, but I had a hope that it would be as wonderful as my sisters had told me it would be.

His full lips touched mine, and I waited for the feelings of love to burst through me like bubbles. He pushed against me even more, and his lips started to move, deepening the kiss. I kissed him back, moving my mouth against his as I waited for the feelings to flow through me like warm, tropical waves. His hand touched my shoulder for a moment, and I opened my eyes. He pulled away with a proud smile.

That is it?

“You are good at that,” he sang.

I felt my cheeks warm.

Is that it? That was a kiss? It was not unenjoyable, but it was not as my sisters had described. “We can marry as soon as you desire,” he said.

Being a little disappointed by my first kiss, I shook my head and focused on his words. Perhaps, when we kissed *again*, I would have the feelings of love burst through me. I was incredibly different from my sisters, afterall. I could not expect to have the same kind of experiences. It was true they had more of a say in the choice of the mermen they married. I reasoned that my traitorous heart would not let me choose a good merman, one that would keep me obedient. Edmar was perfect for me in that way.

“Oh–yes, I would love that. I have always wanted to have merlings. I am sure our children will be so adorable. Can you imagine a white-blond haired mermaid with your red tail?” Despite the kiss, I was still so excited about our future.

“Merlings?” he laughed.

“Yes, of course,” I sang with a frown.

“Well, of course, I would like a *few*, one day–when we have time for that. Sons, of course.”

“‘Time?’ ‘Sons?’” I asked, as his words ached inside of me. I did not need a dozen babies, but I had always thought four or six was a reasonable number. And I wanted *daughters* as well as sons. Had we never spoken of such things? I felt like I had expressed many times how much I adored my nieces and nephews, and how I wanted my own someday. Truly, the idea of being a mother was something that burned inside of me, more deeply than any other feelings.

“Yes–” He caressed my cheek and kissed me again, not causing any more feeling than before. “We have plenty of time to discuss such things.”

“But–you only want a few children? How many is a few?” I asked worriedly.

“One, maybe two. I fear that too many more would be irritating. I was an only child and found it wonderful. I am not fond of merlings,” he said with a wink as if that comment was endearing.

It was not. My stomach ached, and I was sure that the aching feeling wasn’t the feeling of elation that my sisters had spoken of.

I pulled away from him.

How did I not know this?

The rest of the evening, he held my hand and was the perfect betrothed mer, but all the emotions and excitement of being matched at long last were not there. I felt empty. How could it be? It had been the thing I was most looking forward to.

“So?” Rina asked the next morning, singing as she swam into my room with her twins in her arms. They were fast asleep, one against each shoulder, their small matching purple fins slowly swaying. I longed for *that*–how perfect those beautiful babies were.

“Oh, are they sleeping? I want to hold them,” I said, moving to my sister. She smiled, and I could tell she was somewhat relieved by the break. I pulled the two precious mermaids into my arms as they continued to sleep. Their warmth against me caused me to smile, complimenting the small smiles they kept in their sleep. There was nothing more beautiful than those little faces. How amazing it was to think that those sweet, little ones had just been with the Creator. How pure and lovely.

“So, what?” I asked, still feeling conflicted and confused about what I knew she was asking me. I tried to soak up the babies’ sweetness and not focus on my own troubles.

“Did he ask you?” she asked, swimming up to me where I sat on my large shell bed.

“He did.”

“And? What’s going on? You do not seem excited at all!” she sang with a frown.

“He said he doesn't like children, Rina. He only wants one or two,” I sang softly.

“So?”

“I deeply desire children,” I clarified, looking at my two nieces. How could he not want such sweet, little babies?

“Oh, as if it goes as planned as all that,” Rina sang with an eye roll.

“You were blessed with *six* children,” Although my sister was married only five moon cycles earlier, she had given birth three times. Once to triplets, then to one, and again to the beautiful twins asleep in my arms. Many mermaids had twins and other multiple children. Her triplets were three moon cycles old; her third delivery, her twins, had only just been born.

“Yes, and I love each of them.” Her smile was warm as she looked at her two daughters. Even though merlings could be a lot of work, I had seen each and every one of my sisters come into their motherhood, and I understood that the balance was sometimes difficult. They were each a different kind of mother, but I longed for my own chance to see what kind of mother *I* would be. I could not help but long for such priceless work. It

seemed like the work I had been designed for, and I craved it with every single one of my scales.

“Well, once you have one daughter, she will be wrapped around his tail, so he will beg for more. That was how it was with my Dylan.”

“He desires only *sons*.”

“Well, that isn't something that can be controlled, but Dylan also wanted a son. That's normal, I think, for mermen.”

“It just–it makes me–”

“Oh hush. He is a *good* merman, Meria. Father approves, and he would not let you pair with someone who wouldn’t treat you right. You asked him to find someone for you. He knows Edmar is right for you.”

“I am not saying he isn’t a good merman,” I sang. I knew I could not say too much. I could not give away my traitor's heart.

Maybe he isn't the right merman for me. Maybe the Creator has someone else out there for me. Someone who wants more than one or two children, someone who maybe elicits some kind of feeling within me when his lips touch mine. Is that too much to ask for? It’s what I want, and I see it is that way for Rina.

“You are surprising me with all this. Well, you love him, don't you?”

“Yes–” I sang, unsure.

“I know you love children. You are a wonderful aunt. You will be a wonderful mother, and I am sure he will agree. Maybe, let him know how much it means to you. In a marriage, there are many compromises you have to make. Maybe, this could be one he makes. Like with the twins, Dylan often cares for them in the mornings so I can attend meetings. But I care for them in the evenings so he can attend his meetings.”

“Yes, I am sure you are right,” I said. Compromise. We could come up with a suitable arrangement. I shifted a bit, and one of the girls woke up, her bright blue eyes alight. Rina looked down at her daughter and reached for her. I reluctantly let her take both babies from my arms, leaving my arms cold without them.

“Anyways, I have to go–but I told Coral I would get her abalone strand back.”

“I can give them to her. I wanted to see the boys later today.” Coral had triplet boys, and while rowdy and always swimming into some kind of trouble, they were so fun.

“Oh, she and the boys are traveling to the red coral today,” Rina said as she swam over to my vanity shell and grabbed the strand with her tail, as her hands were full with children.

“Really?”

“Yes, but Pearl is around.” She swam from my room, turning around to call back, “Love you, sister. All will be well.”

I hoped she was right. Maybe later, I would go find Pearl. She had seven children, all older than Rina’s, but they always had something going on. I looked around my room, and I slumped my shoulders and reclined back onto my bed. As much as I wanted to spend time with my family, there was an ache and a fear that brought me back to my bed, where I remained, trying to silence my traitorous ways and doubts.

Chapter Five

Dominick

"Are you, Nick?" a dark-cloaked man asked after walking up to me on the dock.

"Who's asking?" I questioned, looking at my gloves as if his dark, menacing presence was of no concern to me.

"The Grimm. I was told to ask for Nick." He walked closer, his face covered by a hood and face covering.

"Did you bring the payment?" I asked him.

"Yes, it's here–the rest," he said, tossing a bag at my feet. I sloppily picked it up and inspected it, weighing it in my hand. As a pirate, I had become good at knowing the weight of coins, and their value. After inspecting the bag, I placed it in my pocket and stood back up.

Everyone had heard of The Grimm. He was known far and wide as an incredible swordsman. Like always, I needed to make sure that once he boarded our ship, he could survive. I was sure The Grimm would pass the test. It was not normal to give people passage as pirates, but we had on a few occasions, and, in those situations, I had to keep up my ruse as a prince.

All the hands aboard the ship were required to keep my secret about being a prince and a pirate. It was a strange life I led.

I pulled out my sword at my waist. I wobbled a bit as I walked, moving my sword so it was in front of me, pointing unevenly at The Grimm. He then took up his sword and had it at my throat rather quickly as I expected he would, and as I had trained myself, I pretended like I had not noticed.

"Are you drunk?" he asked with a scoff.

"Show me your sword, Grimm," I said with a crooked and cocky smile.

"I will kill you," he said as he began to lower his sword.

I waited just a bit longer, making sure to truly sell my feigned, off balance state of drunkenness to him.

"Not before I kill you, and *you*–" I began, moving my sword to the right of him, pointing, as if there was a second man beside him–my pretense: seeing double from excessive drink.

"Put that down, and let me board. I paid handsomely. Prince Dominick expressed that I could have safe passage on this ship."

"Aye, you may do that–after you best me."

"I do not fight or kill drunks."

"That is good, for I do not wish to die tonight, not that I would lose, even if it is two against one," I said with a wink, stepping sloppily closer to him.

"Must we do this?" he groaned.

"Yes. Afraid, Grimm? I know I look fearsome, but my sword is even moreso."

Then, with one quick movement, he raised his sword, but I met him halfway, moving back as he came forward, advancing on me. I moved my feet quickly, yet played into the off balance type of a drunken man. It had taken many years of practice to perfect that ruse–mostly, I had watched drunken crew members, and also men at taverns. No one took drunks seriously and always underestimated them. I liked being underestimated.

"How are you doing this?" The Grimm asked as I continued to meet him hit for hit, at the same time, still keeping up my drunken act.

"What?" I asked with feigned confusion, still meeting him jab for jab.

"This–" he groaned, coming faster at me.

I laughed, "I am a pirate," walking backward a few paces, calculating the edge of the dock. In a show of more drunken dramatics, I fell off the dock, pinwheeling my arms as if to keep my balance. His eyes widened, but I

knew that below us was docked a small boat that would take us to the ship, which Veeto had left for me.

I fell into the boat. I, then, stood up, not needing to feign imbalance in a rocking boat. I put my sword back into my belt.

"You pass," I said with a smirk.

"I pass? What does that mean?"

"Only one of you, though. Now, hurry up; my head hurts," I said with irritation. My head did not hurt in the slightest.

He shook his head and climbed into the boat.

"Row," I said, crossing my arms and leaning back, looking at the night sky and the stars. "You should also know the code."

"What code?"

"The *pirate* code. What happens aboard the ship is not spoken of on land. What happens at sea, stays at sea–or it sinks below the depths."

"So, you are pirates?"

"Will you keep to the code?"

"I am surprised that there is a code amongst pirates."

"Aye, even *we* need order, at times."

"I agree. So, is Prince Dominick a pirate, or does he just travel with them?" he asked as he began to row.

"Yes," I said.

"Is he already on board?"

I shifted closer to make sure he could see my face in the moonlight.

"Seeing as you agreed to the code, I can inform you," I said with a pause for dramatic effect as I sat up taller. "I am Dominick, but call me 'Nick' while aboard the ship."

"*You* are the Prince?"

"Aye, but I am also a pirate. It would do you good to remember that much. No one cares about royalty on board the ship, only how fast you are with a blade. Keep to the code, and don't tell a soul."

"I can defeat anyone."

"Aye, possible, which is why you are allowed to board. Now, do shut up and row."

Chapter Six

Meria

“Why are you moping?” I opened my eyes to see Finn, hovering beside my bed, his silver tail swishing up and down. “Edmar is spreading it far and wide that he is betrothed to the youngest Princess of Marren.” Finn continued to tread water beside my bed as he looked at me with confusion. Even though Rina had helped me feel a little better about Edmar with her words, the worries I still had caused me to believe that Edmar was not who I thought he was.

“I think I made a mistake,” I said, pulling up my woven kelp blanket to cover my face.

He pulled it back down.

“What mistake?” Finn asked, his light hair moving around as he turned his head to the side.

“Edmar only wants one or two children.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised. Finn knew how much I adored my nieces and nephews, and children in general.

“Yes, and it has me wondering; how did I not know this before now? Maybe I do not truly know him.”

“Your father chose him for you. I told you that you don't really know him.”

“But my father knows me better than anyone, and he understands what’s right for Marren.”

“He doesn’t know your heart; only *you* know that.”

“My heart, my soul’s melody, is traitorous; you know that, Finn.”

“That is what *you* think. But what if your heart and your melody are right–and good? Why would your soul’s melody lead you astray?”

Mermaid magic was embedded within every mers’ soul, and within those souls, were melodies. And through those melodies, we communicated with each other beneath the sea. The melodies within our souls literally sang. Most mer trusted in their souls’ melodies. I did not, for my melody was as traitorous as my tail coloring.

With our songs, we could also persuade humans and magical creatures to follow the Creator’s ways of goodness and light. Active souls’ melodies were said to once exist with land creatures, too, but knowledge of how to access melodies originated with the mer race, given to us by the Creator who placed us in the Terran waters Himself. It was said that long ago, the Ancients discovered our melodious souls, through which we communicated under the sea without using our mouths, which was different from how the land-breathers did it. Souls’ melodies were simple to us; they were just how we communicated with each other. We kept it to ourselves, and we minded our own business under the sea. Once the Ancients discovered us, though, we shared our knowledge with them about the power within souls. Soon after that, other magical beings, as well as humans, were taught by the Ancients how to connect to their souls’ melodies. It took hundreds of years, but eventually, the gift was entrusted to all who followed the Creator. Melodies brought beautiful connections, not only to ourselves and to others, but to Terra itself. Once upon a time, there were melodies within all things that lived on land and under the sea. We were taught that the Creator was very pleased during that time. All Terrans had reached their full potential. It was something all living beings of Terra treasured, and it brought peace to the entire world. It was so far in the past, those early days when magical beings, including Ancients, walked among humans, and for a few, even the Ancient Lands had become within their reach.

But by the time the Ancients blessed us with the Marren Lights and asked us to keep ourselves hidden, that world of peace and universal melodies had been long gone—lost. Some believed that it was lost forever. I was taught that both humans and magical beings had forgotten about melodies. The Ancients went back to their lands, and magical beings dispersed to the furthest, most remote corners of Terra, where the Traitor King could not touch them. We, mermaids, waited for the Ancients to return and to tell us that we could swim the Terran waters freely again, but they had not yet come, which we believed meant the world was still corrupt.

During the Great War, when corruption covered most of Terra, and magical beings were hunted, mermaids were included. We were hunted specifically for our healing magic—our mermaid tears. The stories told to us as children, of humans torturing us for our tears, frightened us all so much that not only did we dislike humans, but we did not dare break through the surface of the sea, unless under the moon of the changing tide. It was the only safe time. We hoped that all stories of mermaids would fade into legend over time, and that no one would actively hunt us anymore, but we had no idea if it had, or would ever, happen. It had always seemed better to be safe, just in case, better to wait for an Ancient to come and tell us it was safe.

The lights over Marren continued to dim; still, no Ancient came to help us. There was a fear that the humans had done the unthinkable, that they had killed all the Ancients. I shivered at such a thought.

So, my feelings, which wanted to reach outside of Marren, and also my soul's melody, singing of wanting to go upon Marren Island that day when I had seen it for the first time, were especially traitorous, because if I had done that, it could have exposed us. It was also impossible, because not only did we lack the ability to walk on land like humans, but the sea was where we belonged.

Do you only belong to the sea, though? another traitorous thought came to me. Those evil thoughts were coming more often, seeping into my melody.

I struggled because I felt as if my melody was not as it should be. It kept singing traitorous desires that went against my father and all of the laws and commands that the Ancients had taught our ancestors.

"Meria? Your melody cannot lead you astray. I keep telling you this. Trust it."

“No, I love him.”

“You are *told* you love him. Rina has no idea what she’s talking about, by the way.”

“She—”

“I heard her earlier, talking to Lyra. She is a bit out of touch with reality. And, *you* do not look like you are in love.”

“Finn—”

“I’ve told you this for a long time; it was a terrible choice to have your father select your husband.”

“I know.”

“You have to stop trusting other people, Meria. This is a good example of that. I would have thought that you would have discussed this topic with Edmar *before* the engagement. You are incredibly obsessed with having children. Those little merlings are woven everywhere into your song and your thoughts. You stop all the time, just to hold random merlings. It’s obnoxious–well, it would be if it wasn't so sweet,” he trailed off.

“Thanks, Finn,” I sang with a sigh. “I do not know why I did not bring it up before now. I should have, and I have no idea, Finn; I have no idea what to do about it. Maybe, I need to talk to my father. Am I not meant to have a lot of children? Perhaps, I should not be greedy.”

“That is ridiculous. Of course, you are meant to have as many as you wish! That is not greed, Meria! You are meant to have as many as you and your husband want, but it seems like he’s not on the same side of the reef as you, and if he isn’t on the same side about this topic, perhaps, there are more you two do not see eye-to-eye about, meaning, maybe, your father does not know everything.”

“But—”

“Meria, you have to think about this—and do it for yourself.”

“I believe I love him. But I am a bit confused. His kiss did not feel as I thought it would, either.”

“I do not need to hear all the kissing details, Meria,” Finn groaned.

“No–it’s just that my sisters told me that first kisses were so wonderful–yet, to me, it felt like *nothing*.”

“Nothing?”

“Yes! It is so strange, Finn. There is something wrong with me.”

“It is *not* ‘so strange.’ Also, nothing is wrong with *you*,” Finn said, and I looked up at him with hope.

“It isn't? Aren't I?”

“*No* to both. You do *not* love him, so you didn't feel anything because you should not marry him. It is not so complicated.”

“Isn’t it too late to break the match?”

“No. It’s never too late. Look, I understand your feelings, but, perhaps, you should talk with him instead of laying here in bed, worrying about it? That would be the first and best action, I think. I know you, and that mind of yours is in a whirlpool of terrible, worst-case scenario thoughts, telling yourself that you are traitorous and awful, which is just *not* true. You are the most loyal mer in all of Marren, which is also annoying ‘cause I see how it hurts you.” He paused and looked at me kindly; then continued, “How long have you been here on your bed?”

“It is an important thing to worry over.”

“How long have you been here?”

“What time is it?”

“Two hours till sunset.”

“Five hours? That's not–”

“Nope, that *is* horrible, Meria!”

“Finn–” I whined.

“You need to get out of your room. Let's go for a swim,” Finn sang, tugging at the bottom of my tail.

“I don't feel up to it,” I said, twisting my tail out to push him away.

“I know, but once we are swimming, you will feel much better.”

“I don't want all the mer to congratulate me over and over again when I am not sure I should really be with Edmar.”

“You need to get out of your head, and listen to your soul,” Finn said, poking me in the side and pulling my kelp blanket off of me, exposing my teal tail. “Come on, Meria.”

I groaned, but I listened to him and swam from my bed.

“Fine, but *only* if we go somewhere outside of the city. I do not feel like wearing a covering. I want to swim fast.”

My father expressed to me time and time again that I could only swim without a covering on my tail if I did not allow anyone to see me, other than my family, of course. He did not want anyone to remember our traitor Queen, my mother—and seeing my tail would cause that to happen, it seemed.

“Completely do-able,” he said with a smile. “Come on!”

We swam around a coral reef to the east of the city. It was the smaller, less visited reef, but it was my favorite because it had swimmable caves and many sandy bottoms between the coral, which is where I found most of my shells. I watched the fish for a few minutes before Finn pulled me away into depths and through a tunnel I hadn't explored before. There was a small cave which had an entrance covered by a few seaweed plants.

“What is this?” I asked Finn as he pulled me into the small cavern.

“Okay, so last week, when I was on patrol, I found this cave, and you will *never* guess what’s inside of it,” he said with a smile, tugging me through the cave’s entrance. Finn was a watcher. A watcher was a member of a group of elite mer that were given special permission to roam the nearby Seas. They patrolled the seas above, often watching ships and making sure any human debris did not hurt us or expose our kind to non-mer, especially during storms. It was a difficult position to get, but with Finn, being cousin to the Princesses of Marren, he got the job easily after coming of age. He knew much about humans from his observations of them. He was sure they were no longer as corrupt as they once were.

I was unsure.

As we reached a larger, open part of the cavern, I noticed that the walls of the cave extended high up and reached out above the water. Finn swam to the bottom as I continued to stare up above.

“Look at this,” he said, motioning for me to go to the sandy bottom. I swam and reached him. In his hand, he held pieces of gold, golden flattened disks, and there was a face etched on each of them. I’d seen similar things before—human things that sank long ago.

“Wow–what are they?” I asked, taking one and looking it over.

“No idea, but it is gold, similar to the other treasures that ships have inside of them when they sink,” he shrugged with a smile, taking the coin from my hand and tossing it behind us.

I nodded. Indeed, shipwrecks were so fun to explore, although they were dangerous. I had only explored one of them before, with Finn. He was fascinated by the world above.

He moved more sand away, and it made the water murky. Underneath the sand was a wooden box. “Buried treasure,” he said, pulling the chest up onto the sand. After the sand settled again, he looked around the cave floor for something to open it.

“If this is a human thing, doesn't it need air?” I asked.

“We can take it to the surface. You’ve been at your first changing tide—so, officially, you can go up there.”

“Technically, only under the changing moon.”

“You are with a watcher; you will be fine. I need your help to lift it. So if you want to see it, you’ll have to come to the surface with me.”

I was curious about the box within that unique cave. I had never seen a cave like it, one that was both in the water and on land. Something about that felt right: *water and land*. Excitement raced through me. *Everything I have ever wanted is found under the sea,* I told myself.

But is it? Maybe it isn't all under the sea. I pushed the thought away.

I swam beside Finn, holding one of the handles, opposite of him. We swam up quite a distance, and then, at last, we broke through the surface, swimming to the edge of the cave. The large space opened up, making the water we were in appear to be a small pool, compared to the large, expansive land area of the cave before us. It was beautiful. Sparkling rocks reflected the sunlight which shone down from the holes in the roof of the cave.

“Wow, this is pretty,” I sang.

“Above the sea, speak with your mouth. It’s fun,” Finn said with his mouth moving, the noise echoing around the cave. I heard it with my ears, instead of inside of me—just as I had heard the crashing waves on the rocks, and my father and the other mer chatter, at the changing tide.

“How?” I asked, still using my melody.

“Open your mouth. Your voice will know what to do.”

I opened my mouth. “It is beautiful here.” I placed a hand over my mouth. My voice sounded different than it did through my melody. It was high, and quiet. Although I had never done it before, it was easy, and just like swimming, it felt right–a part of me.

“You did it! It’s easy, right?”

“Yes, so different,” I said, moving my mouth and listening to my words echo around the cavern.

“Land things are beautiful, too, right?” Finn asked.

“Does this count as land? It’s a cave.”

He laughed, but instead of feeling his joy within my soul, I heard it all around me.

That would take getting used to, even if it was easy.

Finn often told me how pretty land was. He had risen above the waves far too early and far too often. However, it was his job at the moment to do so. I tried not to worry, but sometimes I could not help it. I always thought his curiosity would get him into trouble, someday.

“Now, let's see what's in here, now that it’s in the *air*,” Finn said, moving the chest to a large rock. We both moved, keeping our tails in the water, but our upper bodies rested upon the rocks. After a few hits with a sharp rock, Finn got the lock to crack open, and it fell into the pool, sinking to the bottom. The noise echoed.

“Ready?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Yes, I’m impressed that you got it open,” I said.

Finn smiled wide. “What do you think is inside?” he asked.

“I have no idea–useless gold and shiny things? That seems to be all that humans care about,” I shrugged.

He opened the lid. I peered over him to see the continents of the chest. There was nothing in there that I’d expected. Finn removed something that appeared to be many bound pages of human writing–a book. I had seen books before after one fresh shipwreck, right over our kingdom. Books always fell apart in the sea. Mer books were stacks of flat slate rock. I had no idea what humans used to create their books, but they were quite fragile and did not do well in water. I was happy to see that one intact and that I had suggested opening the chest up on land. I reached out to touch the strange brown cover of the book. As I touched it, the wetness of my hand made the cover appear darker.

“A human book?” I asked Finn.

He opened it and flipped through it.

I touched his hand to stop him as I saw an image of a mermaid on one of the pages. “Finn, look at this,” I said, pointing at the image.

“That is odd–” Finn said, staring at the image of a mermaid.

Human words seemed very similar to our language, which also surprised me. The next page he turned to was another drawing of a mermaid–Then–

"Finn! What is that?" I asked, pointing to the rather disturbing image of a mermaid, appearing to have *lost* her tail.

"What–" he said, looking at it closer. "I can read this–" he chuckled.

I brought the book nearer.

"The transition from their mer form to their human form is fast and painless," was all it said. But it was so shocking to hear that it took me a few moments to register what he had just read.

"What in the seas? Their *transition*?" I paused. "What does *that* mean? I have never–" I said, taking the book from Finn and flipping through the pages. Page after page, it showed humans and mermaids, existing together, the mer changing from having legs to having tails and from having tails to having legs.

"We used to live on land, Meria," Finn said in a hushed voice. "I knew it."

"There is no way," I said, handing the book back to Finn.

Did my mother know about this?

"Well–what about this?" He pointed to another image, one of a war and with mermaids and mermen diving from off of the land and into the depths of the sea. "What if during the Great War, we hid in the ocean to get away from King Falcon, and then we eventually just forgot that we could have legs?" he asked, holding up the book.

I could not fathom the significance of what he was saying. My brain had left my body and was swimming somewhere else. I could not grasp it. But my melody, my traitorous melody, *it* liked it–it liked it *very* much.

It was rumored that my mother had often spoken *about* humans. Even so, I had never heard that she believed we could *become* human, even though she had been caught breaking the laws of the kingdom and had been banished for it. Even her husband, my father, could not save her from her crimes, and he had to banish his own wife.

"Meria?" Finn said, and I looked up from the book to address him.

"What if my mother knew about this? What if this is why she was banished?"

"I heard our fathers speaking once. They said something about her being obsessed with *changing*."

"You never told me that?"

“You always tell me not to talk about her. And, at the time, I thought he was talking about changing her *tail dressing* or something,” he said with a shrug.

“That is because no one is supposed to even say her name–let alone speak about her!” I shouted and heard it echo around the cavern.

“Well, I know you never knew your mother, and I also never knew her, but if this is true, why would the kingdom keep it from us? We could blend in with humans—So many options.”

“I have no idea.”

The main gossip in certain mer circles was that the Queen had betrayed her people because she loved humans. Blending with the humans was completely different.

“Mother,” I whispered.

“It makes sense.”

“Is she still alive?” I asked.

“Do sharks have teeth? She was only banished,” Finn chuckled.

Every once in a while, she had sent messages to the castle, warning us that our lights would soon go out. I had believed that she was out of her mind.

“Where is she, do you think?”

“Maybe she’s on land—with the humans.”

I wanted to see her. I actually craved it at that moment. My melody swirled around and made it difficult to focus.

Is there more to us? Can we truly have legs? I wondered.

Still in shock, I watched as Finn kept reading with excitement, so intrigued with the *land* world.

“Here!” he said, turning the page so I could see. “*After fully removing oneself from the ocean for a few minutes, the change begins, and the mer starts to naturally form human legs from what was once a tail.”*

“So–” I said again, still not able to fully fathom what I was reading.

“So, if we leave the ocean, we will gain legs,” Finn said with such a large grin that I frowned.

“No, Finn, tell me you will not leave the ocean.”

“We should see.”

“It is forbidden to leave the ocean. It is not safe for magical beings on land.”

“But why? I bet you that the Great War has been over for hundreds of years! I have patrolled the seas around Marren, and humans sail the seas regularly; there is no sign of war. It should be safe for us above. The Ancients said they would fix the world, and I am sure they have.”

“I don't know, Finn. We are waiting for the Ancients to tell us.”

Finn put the book down and looked at me with a teasing smile.

I glared at him.

“Well, my plan worked.”

“What plan?” I asked.

“I got you to forget your disappointments!” he smiled as he put the book back into the trunk.

“Yes, maybe, but this is even more worrisome.”

“Oh, it is a great mystery, and it will be awesome to discover its truth,” he said, and he closed the lid and scooted it over to a better spot, further away from the water. “This should keep it safe.”

“We should go; it's getting late.” I was not sure what to think. Sure he had distracted me from my worries about Edmar, but I was then worried about Finn and if he was going to do something foolish, like going up on the land. I also wanted to know more about my mother, and why, exactly, she had been banished. Would I ever know?

Would I ever *not* yearn for things I should not?

Chapter Seven

Dominick

"You only got him first 'cause I let you," Sands said, standing beside me as I smirked. I kept the pirate who I'd pulled away from the rest of the crew pinned to the ground with my foot on his chest, and my sword at his throat.

"Ah, you let me, did you? You being slow to pin down a young pirate is not because you are letting me pin this one first. It's because you couldn't help yourself to the first mate's golden watch," I grunted as the pirate I'd restrained, reached for his boot. I kicked at his foot and reached down to remove the knife I was sure he had hidden there. Not very original.

"I need a watch," Sands said.

"You have over a dozen."

"Can't a pirate be punctual?" Sands grunted; then in a huff, he turned to me. "I'll get the next one, first." Sands smiled at me as he, finally, pinned down the boy. "Also, not my fault that this one doesn't have any sense of self-preservation."

"Self what? Ye be tryna' kill us!" the pirate shouted.

Sands smiled again. “If I wanted to kill you, this isn't the way I’d go about it. I believe a death should be memorable. This would be a bad end for you, so you're welcome,” Sands said with a nod.

I chuckled.

Sands reached down to check for a knife on the young pirate's person. “How many of you landlubbers are there on the ship?” Sands asked.

“It be a full crew. I ain’t no landlubber,” the young man said. I hated that he was so young. It was clear that he was inexperienced, just as was the boy I had pinned to the ground. He looked to be around the same age that my brother would be. I hated how weak my heart was, so that it made me think about Peter, the brother I had barely known. I hoped his life was better than mine.

A full crew meant more than twenty. Veeto would kill them all, even the young pirates. He didn’t like loose ends, and a dead pirate doesn’t share his secrets.

“Can you dogs swim?” Sands asked with a smirk, his black hair, not fitting in his almost nonexistent ponytail, shifting in the wind to cover his brown eyes. Sands and I, along with a few other pirates, always invaded the ships that Veeto wanted to capture, first. We rounded and then tied the crew up, preparing them to be sent to the Crimson Blade and Veeto’s wrath. But, whenever we captured *young* pirates, we tried to save them. Sands’ face was playful, but fierce, as sweat dripped from his cheek. There was a time when I did it all by myself. And back then, I was rarely able to save anyone.

Sands had joined the crew only five years earlier. He had been captured as he was robbing Veeto at the Sorran port. It was one of those rare situations when Veeto decided that instead of killing him, he would take him in and make him a part of our crew. Sands was an incredible ally, but I wished he could have had a different life than the one we lived. He deserved something better, even though I enjoyed our friendship. He was the only person on board the Crimson Blade that had an ounce of any morals.

“Aye, we can swim! Please, don’ be sendin’ us to the locker!” *Locker* meant the depths of the sea.

“You swim, you will live. Also, I suggest you grab hold of something and hang on. If you're strong enough, you'll survive. But if you are taken aboard the Crimson Blade?” I said with a humorless chuckle and a glare.

“Aye, you’ll never survive,” Sands finished. “Aye, your survival *be* up to *ye*, now,”

“That was impressive, you sounded just like a pirate,” I whispered to him.

“Aye, that is because I *be* one!” he said with a glare at the boy he held. He was really embracing his role that time around. Every once in a while, I spoke a few words like a pirate would, but I never tried to change my speech much. I depended on being a royal far too often to lean into the habit.

“But Captain Veeto of the Crimson Blade ain’t never leave no survivors,” the boy beneath my boot said.

“*Aye*, so you better not open that mouth of yours–or we’ll regret this and track you down and send you to the locker, rather painfully,” I snapped at him.

“We be silent,” the second lad, who Sands held down, quickly returned.

I looked at Sands who nodded with a smile. We moved the men quickly to the side rail of their sinking ship.

“You are men overboard–survived a shipwreck, and never came into contact with Captain Veeto and his crew. I would advise another profession, maybe on a navy vessel, or as honest fishermen. It is not too late for the two of you,” I said gruffly, shoving the lads back. One looked down at my gloved hand, then back up at me, his eyes round with disbelief.

“Ye be The Cruel Hand?” he gasped.

I led him to the edge of the ship with a broad, evil smile. I watched as his eyes went from shock to horror.

“Aye, that I am. Fare thee well,” I said, and in unison, Sands and I shoved the boys overboard. We watched until their heads popped up and their arms frantically moved, and they swam away. We could only give them a few minutes to swim far enough away so that they had a real chance at some kind of survival.

“Let’s go. Cap will be here soon,” Sands said after a few minutes.

I nodded. We would bring the rest of the crew aboard our ship, and all those survivors would have a worse end than they would have had floating the seas or even simply drowning. Because before their death, they would meet me. And my hands were cruel.

“Nick, we cannot kill them,” The Grimm said, standing beside me as the captain lined up all twelve pirates who had survived the plundering of their ship. As a pirate, you always run the risk of being robbed by your own kind. It was how things worked. You never left another pirate ship and crew alone. You fought them to the death.

“I do as the captain asks. Do shut it,” I said, clenching and unclenching my fists. I knew what was going to happen next. It happened every single time. Like usual, Sands went down under into the ship. He did not like seeing the next part. Neither did I, but I didn’t have the luxury of ever going unseen. I waited for Veeto to give his speech about how he was their new captain and a fearsome pirate on the seas. Then he turned to me.

“Meet a member of my crew,” he said, raising his sword in my direction. That was my cue. I walked up to the men who survived the initial attack. They were all filthy pirates, clothing badly weathered, just as was their wrinkled skin and yellowed teeth. I moved slowly closer to them, pretending to adjust my gloves.

I was known across all the seas, amongst all pirates. I was known for the pain I could inflict.

“Have ye heard of The Cruel Hand?” Veeto asked.

I watched as all twelve of the pirates stiffened, and their eyes grew wide.

“Aye! Ye have heard of him. Well, he has a gift for each of ye.”

I walked until I stood a foot away from the line of pirates and carefully took off my gloves. That was, perhaps, the thing I hated the most about being a pirate on the Crimson Blade. No–it was the main reason I hated Veeto. After my gloves were off, I looked at the men, then on their knees before me with their hands and ankles tied. I stretched out my hands, wiggling my fingers, showing them the very impressive black veins inking my skin, the sign of pain.

“Have you known pain before?” I asked, like my uncle had taught me. I plastered a pleased smile on my face. They were all silent, of course. A few

of our crew members were watching and laughing, while others cheered for me to "give it to them." I acted sober while doing it. No one ever seemed to think anything of that, which was good. "Well, you have never known the pain you are about to feel. Enjoy it, for this pain is a gift, a gift from the Ancients." A curse, really, but I said what my uncle wished me to say. After a few years of refusal, I'd learned a few things about ensuring my own survival, and *my survival* required that I go along with what Veeto wanted, until I could figure out how to make it on my own.

One day, I will. I reminded myself. *One day, I will never have to do this again.*

I walked to the first man, pulled all the pain from my veins; there was plenty to pull from. I could sense his own pain when I touched him. His pain mixed with all the pain still residing in my veins from the others I had tortured as well as those from whom I had taken pain away. It only ever took a few seconds before the pirates, one by one, just from my touch would begin to scream in pure agony. I'd learned not to flinch.

I would never forget their screams. Their screams along with their pains, haunted me daily and occupied my dreams at night.

I counted each and every single man I touched without my gloves. I was up to five hundred and forty-three then. Men all screamed in the same way; they started with a low growl, and then they lost all their manly pride and ended up screaming like young children. It was the worst of sounds, piercing not only my ears, but also my veins, marking my skin with more inky blackness with every man I caused to feel pain. Once they reached that point of the uncontrollable, vile screaming, I let go; then I touched them one last time. I did do what Veeto asked of me, but I also did as I desired. And with that second touch, even though it was only for a few seconds, I took away all the pain I had just inflicted upon them and placed it back onto myself. They were still broken at that point. Even with me taking away the pain at the end, their bodies always remained collapsed and their breathing heavy. Doing that, like always, brought the pain back onto me tenfold, but I was used to it. I was strong enough not to whimper like a child. I moved to each of them, one by one, torturing them till they screamed, then taking away their pain. I stepped back from the last man with a forced smile masking the excruciating pain pulsing inside of me. Unlike what Veeto assumed, this smile was not because I was pleased by my torturing, but for

defying my uncle, and for being, yet again, strong enough to handle the pain. My pain was a level nine after such a show, so much pain.

"One last gift," Veeto cheered, the rest of the crew shouting in appreciation. I walked back slowly toward my cabin. I needed to lay down as the pain coursed through me. I walked past The Grimm, and all I could see were his wide eyes, full of horror. I tried not to think about anything as I pulled my gloves back on. I stopped, waiting.

"Briney deep for ye all!" Veeto called out. I knew without looking that the crew were pulling the injured men up from the ground and dragging them to the side of the ship. There was begging and yelling. Always the same with pirates, and always the same with Veeto. He never let anyone live when he captured them on the seas.

"I know you say you are a pirate, but you are also a prince. How can you let this happen?" The Grimm asked, coming up beside me.

I did not turn to him. Pain still coursed through me, and I could not control myself fully yet. He grabbed my arm, and I pulled out my sword, placing it at his neck, panting into his face with a fiery glare. His eyes glared right back at me. I was always enraged after using my curse. I could not endure his irritating words. He did not understand the position I was in. He did not know what I had endured, nor the life I had been forced to live. I never had a prince's pampered life, or that of a renowned knight, whatever easy life he had, where he was friends with a prince.

"Dead men tell no tales," I growled.

"But the Ancients, Nick, They will not take kindly to this."

"They are pirates, the lowest humans on Terra. Ancients care not for their lives."

"Every life is precious."

"Even one who has killed, plundered, and lied?" I spat back.

"Yes–Everyone deserves a second chance."

I chuckled at his sentiment, but there was no humor in it.

I was surprised by that comment–it shook me a bit. I lowered my sword, and placed it back in its sheath. Then I pulled out my bottle and took a swig, making a show of wiping my mouth on my sleeve while looking at The Grimm.

"You do not agree with the captain. That is why you drink so much; you hate it here, too," he accused.

“His ship, his rules,” I said. “You may not be a prisoner on this ship, but some of us are.”

“You don’t have to do his bidding. You can leave.”

As if it were so easy to leave Veeto’s crew.

“You know *nothing,* Grimm. Do not forget the code you swore to.” I walked away from him, giving him a parting shove for good measure. I slammed my cabin door behind me as I entered. Then I sank onto my small bed, burying my face in my gloved hands, letting the pain have its way with me so it would fade faster.

I listened to the men I’d tortured as they were tossed overboard. With one splash after another, their screams ended and so did their lives.

“Set sail!” Veeto called, and the crew cheered. I felt another spasm of pain burst through me, and I clenched my teeth and fists.

You are so weak, my uncle’s voice echoed in my mind.

No. I am not. I can endure this. I have before, and I will again, I thought as the pain reached its peak at a level ten, unbearable. I bit my cheek, letting my body twitch.

I can endure this. I am strong enough.

I am strong.

Chapter Eight

Meria

"Shall we kiss again?" Edmar asked, swimming closer to hold my waist in his hands. It was an hour before the formal announcement of our betrothal, in the evening of the very same day I had discovered that mermaids might have the ability to develop legs.

"Kiss?" I gasped bubbles into the sea water, making Edmar laugh.

"Yes, Meria."

Maybe another kiss would do the trick. I needed something that would not shock nor surprise me.

Before I knew what was happening, his mouth was on mine. It lasted longer than I wanted, a little bit different under the sea than it had been above. I stayed there, though, swishing my tail back and forth to keep myself even. His mouth was a little aggressive, and I wondered as I pulled away, just after he took a nip at my lip, if a shark was near the area, because if so, they would have smelled the blood from my bleeding lip.

"Did you like that?" Edmar asked with a large smile on his face.

I was silent, looking at him in disbelief, covering my lip with my fingers. He moved my hand and winced.

“Oh, sorry,” he said.

I nodded without being able to say anything else. I had never been more confused in my entire life.

He bit me?

He *bit* me.

Edmar then took my hand, and we swam together past a large school of fish. Their scales, in the darkening blue water, shimmered from the glow above.

I opened my injured mouth into a wide smile, feeling the salty sea water sooth my lip and fill up my mouth and gills.

The sea, it gave us life. The sea was life, and we nurtured her for all she had done for us. As I swam beside Edmar, instead of behind him, I took notice that he had a much larger tail than I did, and longer, too–so each swish of his tail was equal to two of mine, and no matter how many times I complained that we were going too fast and that I couldn’t keep up, he didn't slow his pace. I couldn't blame him. That night was the official announcement of our pairing. I was still unsure of what I wanted, but I did not have it in me to refuse something I had always wanted, and had always counted on.

“I think,” Edmar said, pulling me toward him and kissing my hand as we swam near the large rocks around the castle. We were almost there. “Once we marry, I can help you see the benefits of having fewer children so that we have time for more *important* things. Plus, having more children will give us a higher chance of having a merling with your unfortunate tail color.”

I frowned. Not wanting to start an argument when it was such an important night, I nodded. My sister had assured me that Edmar was a fine catch and that I would be a fool to let my worries ruin a happy marriage. We could compromise once we were married. His slight to my tail, although I had heard so many things about it for all my life, somehow, it was more painful and acute than ever before.

“You are the best, you know that, Meria? I love how meek and mild you are.”

For some reason, that did not feel like a compliment.

I smiled, because he must have meant it in a *good* way. *I am lucky to be at his side.* What we had between us was special, and while I had been unsure before, I decided that we could figure out all the small details with time. Who was I to think I was wiser than my father who had chosen him?

I thought back to Finn and to our discovery of the land-book about transforming mermaids. *Did our ancestors really live on land and the sea?* I shook my head. Land was strange. The ground was *waterless* sand. I had often felt sand at the bottom of the ocean, and to be honest, if all that was up above the waves was dry sand, rocks, and no water, I was not interested. In one book that Pearl had discovered within a sunken ship, before the pages dissolved in the water, she had seen images of large animals with humongous claws that lived above the sea. Father had been incredibly upset at the discovery, so much so that it caused him to give his first lecture about obedience. We had sharks, and they were nasty, sometimes, but we knew how to fend them off and stay out of their way. But those land beasts? Claws? Pearl described them as large teeth at the end of their limbs. It was absolutely terrifying. Plus, I was still confused about the whole idea of breathing in *only* air with no need for water. Although, on the two occasions that I did breathe air, it felt more natural than expected. Finn explained that humans treated air as we do sea water. But, never taking gulps of the salty sea water, seemed an awful way to live. I had only spent a few moments above the sea, and I could not imagine *not* submerging myself in the sea whenever I desired. My thoughts ran a little wild for a few moments in that silence. All of those thoughts about human behavior running through my mind was most likely the reason for what I said next to Edmar, when I normally wouldn't have discussed such topics with him.

I really thought it was a good idea because if I was going to marry him, I would need to confide in him more, just like how I confided in Finn. Perhaps, I could trust him, and it could bring us closer.

“Edmar, do you think that, maybe, we are meant to also know the land?”

“What do you mean?” he said, looking at me with a fear I'd never seen on his face before.

“I found this book–and it talked about mermaids having legs. What if we are meant to rise above the waves and walk upon the land? Maybe, there is something up there that would fix our lights? Land could be the answer.”

He will not tell anyone what I said, right?

“I don’t think this is something we should speak about, Meria. You know what happened to the *Queen*.”

“Yes–well, I am only telling *you*,” I said with a quick smile.

He did not return my smile.

“Meria–the ocean is where we belong. Your father says we only need to wait for the Ancients. They will restore the lights.”

I was disappointed in his response, although it was the one he was supposed to give. Finn had been excited at the possibility. He would have, at least, listened to me and entertained the idea, rather than just brush it aside. Part of me knew that Edmar would never show excitement like Finn did. I instantly regretted bringing the topic up to Edmar.

“Are you ready to speak to your father?” Edmar asked, looking at me and shaking me from my thoughts. I nodded with a smile. Perhaps, it was better that I only talked with Finn about such things, not Edmar.

I took Edmar’s hand in mine and smiled. “Yes, of course.” We moved to the edge of the coral and rock cliff and dived down to the bustling city below, and I wondered, *When will my life make sense? Or, at least, when will my melody match up with my mind?*

Chapter Nine

Dominick

"I will say, Nick, I have had many voyages, and none of them have been quite as awful as this one," The Grimm said with a snarl. I would give him credit for not grumbling during the first few days. I, however, hated that I couldn't get his words out of my head from the day we'd sunk that pirate ship and sent twelve pirates to their watery graves.

"You don't have to do as he says."

If only he knew.

"You can thank the captain for your experience. He runs a marvelous ship," I said with a hand on the wheel. Veeto let me steer the ship when he was in his cabin. I loved very little, but I did love the feel of the wheel in my hands and the sea's salty air upon my face.

One day, I'll have a ship of my own, and my uncle will no longer be a thought in my mind.

Stop it. Not yet, I argued with myself.

"How long until we reach Sorra's port?" The Grimm asked.

I knew the answer without looking at the map, but that was something he did not need to know. No one needed to know that I was smarter than I appeared. He'd already seen too much. It was good that he would be off the ship soon. I didn't need him ruining my carefully laid plans. Not when I was so close.

I kept one hand on the wheel, making an effort to wobble as I pulled out the map from my jacket pocket within my black coat. I held out the map, biting the corner of it with my teeth as I unfurled it.

I had convinced my uncle on the day after we sank that ship, that we should travel the Marren Sea in search of Marren Island. Just East of Marren Island lay the Misted Seas, and those seas were my last hope of finding my sister. I had searched everywhere else. When speaking with Veeto, I'd waited for the right time, and he was always happy after plundering and sinking a ship. It had not been that difficult to convince him. I spoke to him of treasure piled high in lagoon caves and of pearls as endless as the sands upon the shore. Of course, his eyes grew wide with greed, and he stopped listening, just began insisting that he must have that treasure. Was I sure there was such a treasure on Marren Island? No, but he did not need to know that. We needed something, first, even before we could locate Marren Island. It was something I was not even sure existed: a mermaid.

For a moment, I became lost in a memory of a conversation I recently had with Veeto.

"We need a mermaid–or some magical sea creature. Because the tales about mermaids are all we know about magic, and I believe mermaids are our best chance. Plus we know sirens exist. Too many men have been killed by them."

"Go on–" Veeto said with his hand under his white-gray beard.

"We'd have to stay in those waters, there," I said, pointing to a spot on the map spread out on his desk, a map I had stolen from Gideon's private

collection. “And if they really do exist, the mermaids of Marren would have to reveal the island to us, but they only rise when the tides change with the shifting moon.”

“Aye–we can go ‘bout the sea there in circles for a few days.” Veeto nodded at his desk as he looked at the map I had pointed out, one among his other maps of the kingdoms and seas we had traveled.

“We have to capture one of them–or some other magical sea creature,” I said, reiterating, sitting in the chair across from him as he played with his beard.

“Aye, I shall be the firs’ to find a mermaid–after all this time,” he whispered. There was only one thing Veeto loved more than treasure and causing pain to others. He also loved making a larger name for himself. He was already known as The Dreadful Captain Veeto of the Crimson Blade, but of course, being that, as well as the first pirate to actually capture a mermaid and travel to Marren and even beyond? He would not pass that up.

“So, we have a plan?” I asked, standing and taking the map from him.

“Yes, I am impressed. You actually have a brain in that thick skull of yours.”

I just rolled up the map and left with a smile on my face. One step closer to my goal. Many pirates had tried before, of course, to find Marren Island. Everything about it was filled with dark lore. There was trouble in those deep seas just beyond it. Many creatures were said to be lurking, protecting the island from humans, and the one magical beings that pirates knew of through those stories were sirens. Sirens were said to suck out a man’s very soul, even as they seduced him, pulling him down into the depths, and those men never would see it coming because of the sirens’ calls. I had beeswax from Embra to block my ears from any of their songs. I would not be pulled into a watery grave before I completed my mission. I hoped that we would only find a mermaid, not a siren, and if I had been someone who prayed to the Ancients, I would have asked them to deliver one to us. The other problem was how did one tell a mermaid apart from a siren? If mermaids did, indeed, still exist, the Marren Sea would be the only place to find them, I was certain.

They had to have been hiding since the Great War. It only made sense. I had heard rumors that an entire forest was revealed in Solalune recently. It had been hidden by unknown forces since the Great War. The Westwoods was its name, and it hid magical creatures for all that time.

Are the mermaids hiding, also?

I thought so.

Yes, Uncle, I do, indeed, have a brain in my skull, I thought, sarcastically.

Some believed that sirens had once been mermaids, and that after the traitor, King Falcon, ruined the world, he ruined them, too.

I was on my way to finding Princess Layla somewhere across those Misted Seas. *She has to be there*, I thought. The only other possibility was that she could have been inland, but I had a distinct memory of mother and father speaking of Layla when I was a boy. They said she was on some hidden coast.

This has to be where she is–it has to be.

Still beside me, The Grimm waited for my answer, and I let that memory slip away and looked at the map as if I needed it to remember. From my calculations, we were a half day away from where Marren was said to be.

"About a day," I finally answered The Grimm. I rolled up the map, making a show of dropping my hand from the wheel and then leaning forward as if wobbly again. I chuckled and grabbed the wheel with a wave of my hand.

"Someone should take away your drink supply," The Grimm said with a grunt.

"And take away all the fun?" I said with a smirk.

"Is it fun to be drunk while steering a ship?"

"Nothing better in all the seas," I said. With nothing else needed from me, he walked away. I stood still and breathed in the salty air again, grateful to be rid of him and his questions.

I needed to find a mermaid.

I needed to find Marren.

I needed to sail the Misted Seas and find my sister. She had to be there.

I smiled and spun the wheel to the side, making the ship groan as the crew cursed at me. I chuckled and raised my hand to them. I was only at a

level one on the pain scale, which was rare. I would not let it go to waste.

"It was just a large wave!" I called out to more groans and curses. Ah, the sounds of a pirate ship were glorious. I grinned into the wind.

Chapter Ten

Meria

"What is this I hear, that you are singing about mer having legs?" Father glared at me.

How in all the fathoms did he know such a thing? Only Finn and Edmar knew about my questions. Neither of them would ever betray me. *Had someone overheard us?*

"What?"

"Please, Meria, do not insult me. Edmar told me what you told him. You are spreading lies. The mer people are *sea* beings. We were never meant to go onto land. It is a deep betrayal of our people to even think, let alone sing, about such things."

My heart sank.

Edmar told my father?

I had only asked his opinion, and *he felt the need to tell my father?* That betrayal caused anger to rise within me.

I cannot even trust my future husband? How can I marry him if I cannot trust him?

Too many things were against Edmar, and I could no longer ignore them.

I could not marry him.

"Father–"

"You have betrayed your people, just like your mother. I should have known with a tail such as yours. I was so hopeful when you came to me and asked for my guidance in a match, but this!" he interrupted.

"Father—"

"You were raised better than this," he cut me off again. "All I asked for was silence and obedience!"

"I have been, Father, as best I can, but sometimes, I have thoughts–" I sang rather weakly.

"Thoughts? What thoughts?"

"Yes, like why would there be a book about us transforming if we were not once able to do so freely?"

"Some made up tales." He waved his hand in the air with obvious frustration. "It is not true. Your mother was driven to madness with such questions. I tried to help her the best I could, but she was convinced of those lies. They poisoned her soul and mind. She had to be banished before she confused our people and spread her lies."

"But has anyone ever checked? Has any mer ever gone on land to see if we *can* change? From what I read, it is an easy transition. If someone would simply test it out, then we would know for certain. Maybe, that would have helped convince Mother–"

"Silence! I will not hear this!" he stopped me in my tracks.

"Sorry, Father," I said, hanging my head in shame.

I did not know what was coming over me. I never raised my melody, and I never disobeyed my father, or even my sisters. Maybe it was the betrayal of Edmar or my father telling me that I was just like my mother, or everything finally piling up, but I could not stop myself. All the traitorous things stored up in my mind spilled from my lips. For the first time in my life, my anger erupted, causing me to sing freely.

"But–Father, what if there is more to us?"

"How dare you!" he boomed, swimming closer to me, his face only inches from mine, and his glare full of so much hatred that it made me afraid. His melody, too, was darker–not light and happy.

Did I just cause that? What is wrong with me? Why do I have to question things and be this way?

“Father, I am sorry. I did not want to cause any trouble. I love the ocean, I do–I do not want to leave it. I just wanted to know.”

“All you need to know is what I tell you. Be silent!” he shouted.

“I’m sorry, Father,” I repeated, and I flinched, doubting I had done the right thing by speaking my thoughts at all. I was not sure what I believed anymore, but even so, seeing my perfect and solid life dissolving and my father’s faith in me wavering—that made me ache inside.

What if I was being led astray? What if my heart and soul were being swept away in a current where I was never meant to swim? But what if that current led me to waters where I truly belonged? What if that current, when explored, could save all the merpeople who needed the Marren Lights just to survive? What if I could make my father understand I was not going against our ways, only trying to help.

My rebellion would not stop, even though I really was sorry that I had caused my father anxiety, I thought, *Perhaps, if I get everything out now, I will end my traitorous thoughts, and come to trust my father again.* I couldn’t let it go, so I continued in my traitorous line of reasoning.

“I am sorry, Father, but I cannot help but wonder–what if the reason our lights are fading is a sign from the Ancients that we are to go above the waves? What if that is what they want?”

“Meria–” he spat in another warning. I could tell his patience was waning. “You will forget all this nonsense; we are merpeople. That is what the Creator wanted us to be.”

“But our people, they are getting sick; some of the mermaids, those furthest from the lights, have become sirens, vanishing into the forbidden seas, and the merman in those darkened sectors have shriveled and died, all because our lights are dimming. The lights are flickering—I cannot stop being concerned. The Ancients have not come.”

“Don’t you think I know all that! I am sick about it. The Ancients will help us, though; we must be patient.”

“I am trying. I believe in the Ancients, Father. What if our people lose all of these beautiful lights, and what if all of our souls’ melodies become lost–or worse; what if the entire race of merpeople become *corrupted,* just like it has happened to those mer who lived in the depths?”

It was something not often spoken about, but it was true that with the loss of the Marren Lights, many merpeople, especially those simple mer who lived, beyond the main city, were becoming ill. At least, the ill mermen *only*

died once they lost their souls. Soulless mermaids, on the other hand, were far worse off. Some had already transformed into very dark beings as a result of the lack of light, and they had become sirens. Long ago, it was something we thought was only a scary tale to tell our children to encourage them to behave, but we recently had discovered the existence of those heart-eating sirens. They mutated from *us*, for when mermaids were without light, they became dark, and their souls' melodies were no more. A dark magic took over, corrupting them, and they quickly swam far away from all light, dwelling in extreme depths within the Misted Seas' very cool waters. It was said that the sirens' soulless songs lured men to the depths of the sea.

"Do not speak of sirens, Meria. I sense a fear inside of you that is making you act out. You do not need to think or worry about that; that is my job as King. You only must obey."

"Okay–I am sorry father."

I wanted to help, but how could I help when my help wasn't wanted, when my opinions were not respected, when the only contribution accepted from me to help my people was "silence"? It was clear that my father was not going to change his mind, or even listen to *my mind*.

"You will be *silent* about this, daughter! You will not speak of such things ever again. I forbid it!" he bellowed.

I moved back, afraid of his temper. I'd seen him upset plenty of times before—but having it aimed at me was horrifying. I should have never spoken. I always regretted speaking my mind. "I am sorry Father," I said, bowing my head. Even though I apologized, I knew that my traitorous heart would not allow me to stop.

"We know the truth," Father said, shaking his head. "Meria, please, I am begging you to be silent on this matter. It is forbidden. I do not wish to banish you."

"Banish?" I said, surprised.

"You leave me with very few options if you do not obey me."

My heart ached.

My father–he would do such a thing–to me?

"Why would Edmar tell you this, anyway? I told him in confidence."

"Edmar–he has always been a constant help to me–with you."

"What does that mean?" I whispered. My heart felt ready to crack at the possibility of what my father was then telling me.

“He has been keeping an eye on you for me. You are usually very obedient, and even shy and *quiet*. Something I always admired. However, your mother, she was just the same. Then, all at once, she became bold about her traitorous beliefs. I was concerned about you because you were so similar to your mother.”

He has, for a long time, believed that I was going to betray my people? My heart ached even worse, as if I had been struck by a stingray.

My father’s faith in me was gone—and my faith in him was nearly gone as well.

“I—I want to know more about my mother.”

“Meria, I cannot allow this.”

“All I know is that she was a *traitor*; isn’t there something more you could tell me about her?”

“These lies have changed you. You have been poisoned!”

“I have?” I asked without thinking.

Is that a possibility?

No. You have to save your people, my song answered my thoughts, and I believed it.

“Yes, trust me, Meria, all is well; we are well, and most of Marren is thriving. Mother Ocean will continue to provide as she always has. The Ancients will come.”

I knew Marren was *not* thriving; although, yes, a majority of the mer had not yet died or become sirens, a significant minority of mer *were* dying and losing their souls. All mer were of value, not just those fortunate to have been born closer to the light.

Why is he lying to me?

“I don’t think we are thriving,” I said, softly, with real fear.

His head moved sharply to meet my gaze. “Enough! I am sick of the blasphemy spewing from your lips. I am ashamed of you. Leave at once!” He swam closer to me, grabbing my shoulder in one of his strong, large hands, pushing me toward the exit of the throne room.

“So I am banished?” I sang in disbelief.

“You give me no choice. If you do not match with and marry Edmar, I will banish you. Once married, you will listen to him, *always*. He will keep you in check. These wicked ideas and thoughts shall never pass through your soul’s melody again!”

“‘Keep *me* in check?’” I had no desire to be a prisoner, let alone a prisoner to my husband. *This is wrong. I cannot do it. It would be wrong for me to do it.*

“If you show that this rebellion is done with, I will not be forced to banish you.” A look of anger pulsed within his eyes.

I didn’t speak. I was too afraid, confused, and heartbroken. I felt beaten down.

The doors opened, and a current rushed in. Coral came inside with her bright purple tail flipping behind her.

“Coral, what did I say about coming in when the doors are closed?” Father asked, looking from me to Coral.

“‘Do not open them, but Father, the watchers came back from the surface, and they said that there is a storm coming, along with a human ship. The waves are changing, and the city needs to be evacuated. The humans are closer than they have ever been before to Marren Island.”

“That is the third storm this week. It isn't even storm season.” Father stroked his light blue beard, looking at his navy blue tail.

“It is rather odd, but Finn has informed us that the same ship has been circling the area for a few days, even with the storm approaching. We are afraid that they are looking for Marren Island,” Coral added.

“Okay, thank you,” he said to Coral. Coral looked at me with a confused look on her face.

“What is wrong, Meria? Father?”

“Nothing. Go, Coral,” Father said. With one last saddened look for me, Coral turned and swam away. As soon as she was gone, he turned to me. “Leave. If you refuse to do as I command, I never wish to see your traitorous face again,” Father swam out of the throne room, calling for more patrolling mermen to follow him.

His words struck me like a spear in my heart, and I was frozen there. I sank to the floor of the throne room. He may have thought I had been poisoned, but it was clear while he was speaking with me that his soul’s melody was not as strong as it should have been, and–*he* was wrong. No matter what he believed, I knew I had found that information for some reason, and I knew that I could help our people. I did not have all the answers, but I would find them.

I might have been banished from my home there under the sea in the Kingdom of Marren, but I would return, and I would save all the

merpeople, even my father, who held no more love for me.

Chapter Eleven

Dominick

"Captain?" I began, walking to Veeto at the ship's helm.

"She can hold a bit longer," Veeto said, with greed in his eyes as he fought for control of the ship in the raging storm.

He was going to get us all killed. We could have waited out the storm in calmer waters and come back to the Marren Sea after it passed, but it seemed he was determined to kill us. I could not say I was surprised. We had been blown off the path a bit, but we were very near the Marren Sea before the roughest part of the storm hit. Veeto was holding onto the wheel to keep us in position, and we were being battered by the sea and the storm since we had arrived near the Marren Sea. We were close; the island had to be close, but I had no desire to die before I found it.

The Grimm ran up beside me. "I don't know much about ships, but I think ours is sinking."

"Great–" I groaned as the wind blew even harder. "What helpful information, Grimm. I had no idea we were in the middle of a storm," I shouted, in irritation.

Veeto called out more orders, when lightning struck the mast. Sands ran to the back of the ship as a few of the crew called out to him.

In only a few moments, the ship was aflame. I had a mixture of emotions tangled up within those *long,* few seconds, just like the rigging of the ship in that storm.

Horror.

Freedom.

Hope.

"It's true! The Ancients have cursed these waters!" I heard someone shout as they raced across the deck. There were only a few small boats to save the entire crew in case of a sinking ship–not enough.

"Get into a boat!" I said, shouting at The Grimm. He nodded and turned, running to the other end of the ship, where the crew was loading.

"Get in the boat, now, *Hand*!" Veeto called from the side of the ship nearest me. He dropped into the boat, which dangled there.

I understood that *I* was what gave him so much strength and power upon the seas. I had not always understood that, but by then I knew that Veeto needed me more than I needed him.

Is this my chance to finally be rid of him?

I walked up to him and saw that the boat was full of crew members. I looked at the ropes, securing the boat to the side of the burning ship. I looked at them all, then settled my eyes upon Veeto.

"Come, boy!" he snarled.

I had told myself that if there ever was a way I could separate myself from him, I would take it.

Take the opening, or the opportunity. Is that not what Veeto had taught me?

"I will go in another. Go," I said, acting as if I was helping by cutting the ropes. I knew, and, by the look on Veeto's face, he also knew that there was no other boat. Veeto's face was enraged.

Good.

I smiled, lifted up my hand and wiggled my fingers at him. As his boat bobbed in the stormy sea below, I continued to smile, and then ran to the other side of the ship. Something fell upon me, and the next thing I knew, I was in the water, hoping that only The Grimm, Sands, and myself would survive.

Chapter Twelve

Meria

I swam through the corridors of the palace on my way to my room. I was quite despondent, but I needed to gather a few things, and then, I would go find my mother. If I could find her, perhaps, she could tell me what the book I had found meant. She was the only mer who had ever spoken openly about her fear that the lights which were dimming might go out completely someday. She had also wondered about life above the waves, according to my father. I needed to speak with her. I burst into my room. Finding a small satchel, I put in a few shells and some other items that were special to me. I felt such sadness. I turned back to glance at my room one last time; then I nodded my head and swam out.

The halls were already empty. All the merpeople had evacuated. As I swam to the entrance of our city, I saw Edmar there, swimming back and forth in front of the doors as if on guard.

Oh, fish guts!

I had to confront him.

Great, that is the last thing I want. Although I did not want to interact with him at all, I needed him to know that I was aware of what he'd done, and that there was no chance for us to be wed after what he'd done to me.

"Meria, you need to evacuate." Edmar pulled at my wrist, but I pulled away from him.

"Okay," I said, ashamed of myself for being a coward.

Tell him. You just told your father. Although even with him, I held back.

"What is the matter?" he asked in his polite way, and I wondered if that was an act, too. Was everything between us an act? Why did he have to be so observant when I just wanted to move past him and leave?

"My father–" I started, but could not finish as Edmar spoke over me.

"Ah, yes. I hope you will listen to what he advised you today," he said, touching my cheek.

I pulled away from him.

"I should go," I said, trying to move away, but he put an arm out to stop me.

Tell him, my soul begged me.

"You will obey your father, won't you? I could not see myself with anyone but you, Meria," he said with a smile, but for good reason, I did not think it sweet. He was clearly indicating that he would not like me if I questioned and disobeyed.

I was disobeying, I was questioning; I had to.

I was not going to marry that merman.

Then tell him that! I shouted at myself within my soul.

"I always obey my father," I lied, ashamed once again, for being a coward and not confronting him like I knew I should have.

Why can I not be brave, or bold? Why can I not sing what is in my soul?

"Yes, you are very obedient. I think that is one of the things I love most about you. So agreeable."

“I have to go–” I said, moving his arm down to give myself some space to swim past him.

“Yes, of course.”

But before I let him say another word, I flicked my tail, causing a flurry of bubbles in front of his face, and I zoomed off and up. I needed to talk to Finn, to tell him I had been banished–and that I was going to search for my mother, even if there was a storm.

In only a few moments, Edmar was behind me, grabbing my tail. Curse him and his fast swimming.

“Let go,” I sang loudly.

“Where are you going? There is a ship up there.”

“I just need to see Finn, and I will be right down,” I lied again.

I cannot tell him the truth, but I can lie? What does this say about me?

I slipped from his grip, finally, and swam straight to the surface. Watchers were all around. I could lose him in the chaos. I thought about diving deep, but with his larger tail, it would not be an effective escape plan. He would catch up with me very quickly. My best chance of escaping him was to find Finn in that stormy sea. I searched through the dark waters.

Where is Finn? He has to be up here.

Then, there was a flash, and suddenly a fast current pulled me far away from Edmar, and I then swam upward, breaking through the water again. There was another flash, and a ship in front of me was struck by lightning. Instantly, red and yellow ripples covered part of the ship. The seas continued to rage, and I turned around, seeing Finn, finally, at my side.

“What are you doing here, Meria?” he asked, swimming closer. The waves sloshed back and forth so fiercely that we were tugged closer to the ship. The water was warmer there.

“They are jumping,” Finn sang to the watchers. “You cannot be out here, Meria. Go back to the castle.” I saw to my great irritation, that just behind Finn, Edmar had popped from the water. He was a dozen feet away from us, and I could not let him near me again. I was done hearing him speak and telling *me* who *I* was. I did not love him. I did not want to be with him. Never again.

“Please, Finn–Edmar–”

“What?” Finn asked, his eyes locking with mine.

“He told my father about having legs. My father has banished me.” Finn’s face looked as if he wanted to murder someone, probably Edmar.

“I hate him.”

“Please, just, I need to stay with you. He is here, and I am afraid.” A huge wave engulfed us, and we dove, then rose again.

“Fine, we will figure out his issue after the storm. You have to stay close to me. You could get really hurt out here without training. Ships break apart when they sink.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod. Then he dove into the water, swimming toward the ship, and I followed after him.

There was another flash, like the one that caused the ripples on the ship.

“What is that?” I asked Finn as we got closer. There were tubes of lava in the ocean in the southern waters, but they were always quickly cooled and encased, and they only made the surrounding water rather warm. Whatever that was, was far more destructive.

“It happens during storms when a ship is hit by lightning. Fire. It is very dangerous for humans. We have to make sure they do not float right over the castle, and sometimes, we listen to know what they plan to do.”

“You can understand them, the humans?”

“Yes they speak *our* language, Marren. Remember, just like that book we found,” Finn said with a smile. “Even more proof that we are part human, too. All the humans will be abandoning ship now, because they are afraid of the fire. Dive down a bit.”

I watched as, sure enough, all around us bodies dropped into the ocean. Others were in smaller ships, bobbing upon the waves. Watchers darted through the water, capturing the humans and pulling them up to the surface. I swam down deep enough to where I could still see faintly, but far enough away that I wasn't in the way.

“Meria, you left me.” I turned to see Edmar swimming for me.

I swam up to the surface again, not wanting to be stuck in the depths alone with him. I swam up as fast as I could, but he caught my tail, pulling me under. “Not so fast, my little fish.”

“Why are you here?” I asked in irritation.

“I love you, Meria. You should not be out here.”

“Thanks, but I am fine with Finn.” My frustration had to be obvious.

I watched as the watchers dove in and out of the water, pulling humans and other odd things from the water, shifting them away so they would not fall upon our city.

“Meria,” Finn sang to me from above. I swam up to the surface again. Edmar was still holding tight to my tail, but that time, he was not pulling me down. I popped from the water, and Finn swam over to me. “There you are. I thought–” He looked behind me and saw Edmar and glared at him. “Let go of the Princess.”

“No, she’s mine, my betrothed. I have a right to make sure she is safe.”

“Only if she wants you to save her. I do not think she needs saving or wants you here,” Finn said, swimming closer. We bobbed in the water and ducked under a few waves before Finn reached us. My tail was still in Edmar’s strong grip, and I felt such relief when Finn pulled me away from Edmar, then pulled out one of his weapons and hit Edmar over the head so quickly that I couldn’t do anything to stop him, not like I would have. Edmar needed to learn to listen.

“He is a fool,” Finn said as Edmar’s body sank to the ocean floor. Relief flowed through me. Hopefully, he would sink to the bottom and wake up forgetting the entire situation.

“Thank you, Finn,” I said, finding it hard to speak.

“Of course, Meria.” He looked around, and the waters were filled with more and more humans and human things.

“You really should go. Go to the cave, the one with the book, and I will meet you there after the storm. We can figure out what to do from there.”

I nodded.

“Thank you, Finn, for everything.”

“Be safe.” Finn nodded and swam up to the surface again. I started swimming to the other side of the kingdom to find the cave.

As I was swimming, I noticed a human directly above me. I stopped for a moment, trying to steady myself as best I could as the sea continued to rage. The man, who was by himself, kept slipping under the waves. In the corner of my vision, I saw the watchers who were helping the humans, but *that* human was too far away for them to notice him. We did not save humans for their benefit. We saved humans because we did not want their remains in our oceans, and we did not want them to find Marren Island. Or that was what was taught. Looking around, though, at the watchers, I could tell that they were happy to help save so many lives. After saving them, we mer had the ability to make the humans forget that they ever saw us. I had never been taught how, but I knew it was possible to do, using our songs.

I hesitated.

If I help that struggling human, I do not know how to keep him from remembering me, I thought, but as the human became fully submerged, I didn't think anymore.

I acted.

I kicked my tail, pushing me through the water and up to him. I wrapped my arms around his frame and soared out of the water as my force had been so powerful. We dove back under the waves, and I slowly moved him so that his head was out of the water. I knew humans could only breathe air. As the waves sloshed back and forth against us, I worked hard to keep his head above water, looking around for Finn or a watcher who could take the human from me and save him. I kicked my tail against the waves, over and over, and called out with both my melody and my voice. No one heard me over the raging storm. I knew that we were near Marren Island. The human needed land, so I started making my way to the island. It seemed as if I was in the water for hours. His large body was difficult to keep above water, even for me and the excellent swimmer I was. Finally, I saw the small outcropping of rocks where we had welcomed the change of the tide. I swam past it and to the sandy island's shore, which I knew belonged to us, even though no mer ever went there.

If we were not meant to have legs, then why did we have an Island? Father had always explained that the rocks were there for us to bask in the moon under the change of the tide, but why did we need an island? Of course, if we had once had the ability to transform from humans to mer, then that island would have been used often by my ancestors. My mind swam with questions. Finally, in the crashing of the waves onto the sandy shore, we were free from the waters depths that would kill the human. I pulled him as best I could onto the dry part of the sand. My tail scraping against the sand hurt, and I winced in pain. Finally, being out of the water, I collapsed to the side of the human and watched for any sign of movement. I saw his chest rise and fall and figured he was still alive. For a moment, I looked at him even closer. He was incredibly striking–a strong chin and jaw with a large scar on the side of his face. I wondered what had happened to that human to get such a scar. His hair was dark, like the fathoms of the ocean where the glowing fish lived. I watched him, taking in seeing a real human so close up, when suddenly, his eyes fluttered open. His human eyes caused me to gasp. They were a dark blue, and even in the glow of the

moon, I could see just how beautiful they were; so different. No one under the sea had eyes that dark.

"You–" His mouth moved. I could not sense a soul's melody within him. I would need to open my mouth. There was a cough, and he spit out sea water. I knew I should have left, because talking to a human was more against the rules than anything else. But I was frozen there. It was as if I were in arctic waters without any extra layer of warmth to protect me. I just could not move.

"Are you alright, human?" I asked. It came out as a whisper, and I hoped he heard me, for I did not wish to say it again. I noticed a cut on his leg, and I healed it as best I could with the little energy I had left, and then I realized my mistake. I needed that energy I had just given away in order to return to the sea. Still, I began to shift back toward the waves, when he spoke.

"Are you a mermaid?" he asked, his eyes upon my face for a moment; then they closed again.

I frowned.

Will he be okay?

"Thank you–" he said, and then his head lulled to the side as if he had just fallen asleep. I felt warmth, then; it was warmer than the tropical waters near the lava flow as I looked at him and realized he was alive. I had saved him. I saved a human.

He thanked me–a human had thanked me. Something *evil* would not thank someone. I raised my head and tried to shift my shoulders and body downward so that I could go back into the water. But as I tried, I realized I was too far away. I had barely any strength left at all.

Am I safe with this human? Will he wake and kill me? I wondered.

As my eyes fluttered shut, I realized that not only did I have no strength to get me out of that situation, I was about to lose consciousness, just like the human had, and my head also lulled to the side.

Chapter Thirteen

Meria

My tail hurt. I tried to sway it back and forth to figure out exactly what was wrong with it; only, something did not feel right. Noise–I could hear noise. Waves were crashing against rocks, and something above me was making strange squawking sounds, and *air*–air was all around me. My melody sang out, hoping to connect with any nearby mer. I took in gulps of air, greedily, touching my hand to my heart.

I was on land.

This is okay–I will be okay.

Feeling even more pain in my tail, I opened my eyes, wondering if I had injured myself. My head was turned to the side, and the view before me distracted me from my goal for a moment. There was a human man there beside me–breathing heavily, soaking wet on the sand.

In a surge, it all came back to me.

I saved this human. We both passed out on this beach.

In the morning light, I could see the man more clearly; he had a glint of gold at his ear, a ring of sorts, a scar on his cheek, and his dark brown hair

went this way and that and partially covered his face. I remembered that hair did not float around people, or mermaids, when they were above the sea. My hair was just hanging there all around me–and rather heavily.

I reached out to rub my aching tail when I realized that I was missing my scales. I had skin where my tail should have been. I sat up with a start, surprised to see two legs there, instead. It was strange. I blinked over and over again, as if blinking would make it less shocking. It did not work.

This is good–you are half human.

I had no idea how to use those legs. I knew that humans balanced on them.

Perhaps, before this human wakes up, I can practice.

I needed to behave like a human, after all, did I not? I wasn't sure that I wanted this human to know I was a mermaid, especially because I didn't know if humans were still evil, as they once were when we had gone under the Marren Sea. Finn had always said humans had changed, but I wanted to be safe.

I placed my hands on either side of me in the dry sand, and I tried to lift myself up, bending my legs as I attempted to use my feet. I only knew the anatomy of *legs* because Finn had once explained it to me. Pulling myself up, I wobbled and fell back down. I tried over and over again in frustration until, finally, I stood and balanced myself. I took my first few steps, and to my surprise, it was quite easy. I walked back and forth, falling every once in a while, but my legs were surprisingly strong, and once I figured out how to balance on them, I could walk easily, just putting one foot before the other. I smiled at my triumph.

It is easy because it is part of who you are.

My melody was singing so loudly I was sure it would wake the human if he had a melody of his own somewhere inside of him–although I detected none. I walked back down beside him, looking him over once more. Then after some time, I turned to look at the island, the place that my people must have once inhabited. I wanted to see what it was like.

There were no clear signs of my people having ever lived on Marren Island from my walk through nearly half the island. I was disheartened by that. How could there be no signs that my people had once dwelt there? I had legs. That had to be the place where we spent time as humans.

As I walked through more of the wet foliage and tall plants on the west side of the island, I was in awe of it all. Although so different from the kelp forests, which I had always thought were rather beautiful underneath the sea, those plants had their own beauty, a land forest of sorts. I walked a while longer before deciding to turn back toward the beach where I had left the human, when I stopped suddenly, wobbling at the abruptness, because something on the wet ground caught my eye. Bending down without falling was not particularly easy, but I managed. It was something hard, like stone, yet carved and buried deep within the sand. I pulled at it, and after digging about it for a while, it came out of the ground, causing me to fall. It was hollow beneath it. It was dark and deep. I dug around the edges for many minutes, and soon a sort of cavern was revealed. I crawled in just a little ways, where I discovered something white and partially covered with the wet, brown, sticky sand that was all over the island's forest floor. I wiped it off, revealing ridges and a beautiful pink inside. A seashell. I smiled. Then at my left, under some small rocks, I discovered something else. I pulled it out from the brown, wet, sandy ground, wiping it off to reveal a strand of black pearls. They were Marren pearls–a necklace. My sister’s pink strands were strung in just the same way. Surprised, I looked even closer around where I stood. There were small things all over: some netting, more pearls, Abalone and conch seashells, as well as small slates, which were cracked and partially buried, but clearly carved in a Marren script.

My people have been here. This must be part of an old home.

There were no structures or buildings. It had been five hundred cycles. Perhaps, they tried to destroy any evidence of their civilization before going into the sea, or their buildings might have been destroyed by storms, or

even just the natural processes of time. And yet, those seashells, that strand of pearls, so clearly mer. That made me smile.

We had been there–my people.

You are exactly where you are meant to be, my melody sang.

Chapter Fourteen

Dominick

Light blue eyes –a tempest so strong; it pulled me from the deck of the ship, water–thrashing. *I had been tugged. Had I been pulled to the depths? Am I dead or dying?* I wasn't sure.

Two blue eyes–as light as the clearest sky. I coughed and sat up quickly, realizing that, yes, indeed, my body was in too much pain to be dead. I was very much alive. The pain radiating through my body was terrible, but it wasn't half as bad as the worst pain I had experienced before, and for that, I counted myself lucky. I opened my eyes to the rising sun, glistening at the crest of the waves. I was on a beach.

What beach?

We had been out way too far from any land for me to have washed up in any kingdom, even Walden.

Is this Marren Island?

Have I found Marren? I shook my head, and sandy water droplets fell around me. I looked beside me, seeing an imprint there–of a body?

It hit me, then. Someone had saved me. Those blue eyes.

A siren. No–sirens killed sailors. A mermaid? Could I be so lucky?

I looked at my hands and noticed that my gloves were no longer there.

No. Did the person who rescued me take them off? Did I kill my rescuer?

I looked at the spider-like webbing of my inky, black veins. I sat there for a few moments, wondering again what had happened.

Did someone really help me get out of the water? What happened to Sands and to The Grimm? Is my uncle lost to the sea?

I hope so.

I gulped, hoping that he was beneath the many fathoms. That was where scum like him belonged.

"Hello?"

I turned toward a feminine voice, coming from behind me. The crashing of the waves almost drowned her out completely.

I looked back at her, but quickly turned away again, my cheeks heating up. She was–she was hardly wearing any clothes. I had no idea where that maiden had come from, but she clearly was not from Walden. If it wasn't for her extremely long hair, and whatever small fabric had been covering some very specific parts, I would have seen too much. I cleared my throat and closed my eyes. She, for sure, was not a siren, nor a mermaid, as she had legs.

My hope of finding a mermaid was tugged away, along with the tide in front of me, which was lapping at my waterlogged boots.

How did they manage to stay on, yet my gloves did not?

"Hello," I said, focusing on the washing waves upon the sand. I heard her movement to the right of me and turned my head to the left as if I was looking at something incredibly interesting. But her face came closer to mine, and she touched my hair. As much as I was confident as a pirate and fine enough as a prince, I was not at all sure what to do in the presence of women. They were incredibly foreign to me. When my shipmates went into taverns at various ports, many of my fellow crew members sought the attention of women. I had never sought out female attention, and as soon as the maidens in those taverns started to drift near to me, I would always leave. I did not need to entangle myself in that. I steered clear of females.

"Are you alright?" I looked at her, focusing on her face–her eyes, nothing else.

I could just treat her as I did everyone else.

That will work. I can imagine that she is not a beautiful maiden. I can imagine that she has a limp and is a dirty, rotten pirate.

But already, even though I did not know that maiden, just by looking into those light blue eyes, I could sense that she was untouched by the horrors of the world. There was an innocence there that made me pause.

All of a sudden, I had this urge to protect her–to keep her away from the horrors I'd seen. That probably meant she should stay away from me. I had seen hundreds of women, in all areas of life, even the royals of Terra. But that maiden? She was the most stunning one of them all.

I could do difficult things. I was a pirate. I was The Cruel Hand. I did what needed to be done.

I will not be affected by this maiden.

"You saved me?" I asked. Those eyes were the eyes I remembered seeing when I first awoke.

"Yes," was all she said, stepping back.

"Clearly, you are not a mermaid," I said in frustration, looking down instead of up at her, but there, too, she was not properly dressed, with some gauze-like, white fabric barely covering her lower half. I saw more than I should have of her very shapely, long legs. I closed my eyes and cleared my throat.

I'd never seen so much of a woman's bare legs before. I liked the view entirely too much.

"You are bleeding," she said, causing me to open my eyes once again, but that time, I looked at her, only using my peripheral vision, making out her fuzzy shape, pointing at my head.

"I am alive; that is all I can ask for," I said. I, normally, did not speak so kindly to random people, or even act as if I was lucid, but that maiden had saved my life. There was no one else there. I did not need to be rough to protect my name.

"Good," she said.

"Is this Mermaid Island?"

"Marren."

"Are we the only people here?"

"Yes."

"Do you live here?" I found it difficult to speak with someone without looking directly at her. I needed to make her more modest so I could concentrate on our situation and our survival upon that island, instead of on

her body. I gulped, taming any improper thoughts of her legs. I may have been many horrible, wicked things, and even though I had spent very little time with maidens, I still knew how maidens should be treated, and I would treat her with respect.

"I do?" she said, but she said it as if it were a question, not an answer. Perhaps, she had been there, stranded for such a long time that she had trouble speaking with people.

"Did you have a shipwreck, too?" I asked as I quickly took off my wet coat and belt. After that, I stood with my back to her, upon wobbly legs, and took off my vest and shirt. I set my shirt, vest, coat, and belt in a pile, then pulled my vest and coat back on.

"You can wear this; it seems your shipwreck took your clothes," I said, pointing to the pile I made of my shirt and belt, but not looking at her.

"Thank you," was all she said. After a few minutes of wrestling, I turned to see she was wearing my shirt, but upside down, and the belt was placed like a necklace around her neck. I smiled, holding back a laugh. I had no idea why she had done such a thing, but it looked hilarious.

"Oh, actually–" I walked to her and explained my idea about how to wear the shirt and use the belt to cinch it in place, as the shirt was three sizes too big for her and long enough to cover her knees. I desperately needed her legs covered as much as possible. They were very distracting. I turned again as she situated herself. Something hit me. Seeing her in my shirt, it seemed so personal, but it was the least I could do for my rescuer.

"Much better. What is your name?" I asked.

"Meria,"

"That is a lovely name. I am Dominick," I said, then paused. Why had I given her my prince name? I never gave anyone that name unless I was at a castle. "How long have you been here?" I asked, shaking my foot to dislodge the sand.

"Not very long."

"So, you must have been a part of another shipwreck and washed up on this shore? Did you see our shipwreck and come to help?"

"Yes," she said with a nod.

"That's pretty dangerous." I looked down at my hands. "You did not happen to see any black gloves?"

She shook her head. It was what I assumed. I had lost them during the wreck. I would just be sure not to touch Meria. That would be easy enough;

I never struggled with that in the past when around women.

"I am blasted thirsty," I said with a hot, itchy throat.

"Not-sea-water," she pointed behind us. What a weird thing to call fresh water.

"Can you show me? I could really use a drink."

She nodded and began walking up the sandy beach a ways; she wobbled a bit as she walked. I wondered if her legs ached as mine did.

We entered a thick, tropical, green forest. Vines hung down, and there were a few insects flying around. The forest floor was wet, and as we walked, Meria, I realized, was barefoot, her feet coated in brown mud and sand. We continued on until I heard it, a babbling. I wanted to burst from the foliage, but I waited for Meria to stop. I moved to the bank of the small stream, which filled up a deep pool. The water was fresh and crystal clear. I sunk my hands into the clear, fresh water and greedily drank.

"Thank you," I said, turning around to see Meria, who just stood there, watching me. There was a refreshing, earthy taste to the water. "Will you drink?"

"I do not like it," she said, scrunching her nose.

She would have to get used to the unique taste of water in a stream if she wanted to survive on the island. She must have drank from it before, how else could anyone survive being stranded there? I looked away from her, taking one last gulp.

She did not seem to be much of a talker. That was alright. If I had not had a dozen questions, and if I had not felt responsible for our survival, I would not have talked so much or as freely either.

There was something calming about that maiden's presence.

"Well, we should probably look for some shelter. If we are here for a long time, that will be important."

She nodded.

"Have you explored any other sections of the island?" I asked.

She shook her head. I looked around for a few minutes. There was a cliff in the distance. Perhaps, there was a cave; that would be the best option, not knowing what kind of weather was common on that island.

"We need to search that side of the island to see what is over there. I have heard of this island, but I do not know much about it, only that it was once inhabited by mermaids; however, that seems highly unlikely as mermaids do not have legs."

She was looking at me, nodding her head as I spoke. I watched her for a moment as she took a look around at the stream and its surroundings. She had such unique, white-blond hair with pink hues to it, and it was incredibly long and wavy, incredibly striking and beautiful, even in its mess of tangles. She even had sand in her hair, along with a few pieces of seaweed. Although that maiden was a complete and total stranger, she had saved my life; I would be kind to her. Perhaps, that is why I had given her my prince name. I would treat her how I was taught to treat ladies at court. I also could not help but be kind, as she seemed so timid.

I wondered for a few moments, and I moved my gaze from her, back to the path from where we had come.

Who else had survived the wreck? Had The Grimm survived? I wondered, again, if he was alright. I did not need problems with Thorn, or with any kingdom. But then, again, I had not forced him to come; he wanted to.

I didn't even want to think about Sands, as losing him would have hurt more than I wanted to think about.

"Are you alright?"

I jumped a bit as Meria was suddenly beside me, her eyes looking up into mine. She had such light blue eyes–so light that it seemed they could have almost been white–so strange, so beautiful.

"Dominick?" she said, and hearing my name from her was a strange thing. I usually disliked that name, for it represented an old me, who had died a long time ago when Veeto made me one of his pirates.

"I am sorry. I was just thinking about my crewmates. I hope they are all safe," I lied. I only cared about two: Sands and The Grimm. Everyone else could drown in the fathoms.

"Yes," she said, then moved back away from me.

"Well, before it gets dark, we should probably take a look at those caves. We have water, but we need shelter, and I should be able to catch some fish." She jumped back at my words and shook her head, *no*.

"Meria?" I asked. "Do you not like fish?"

"I like fish," she said. "Just not out of the water."

"Okay," I said, confused at her response. "Well, we should go look, but if you would like to stay here, I can find you once I am done."

She nodded, but I wasn't sure what she meant by it. I guess, I would see what it meant when I started walking. If she followed me, then she was coming.

I moved between the green foliage, going as carefully as I could so I would not slip. Falling in front of Meria was the last thing I wanted.

Wait, why? I didn't care what that maiden thought of me.

I do not care.

Nope.

Not at all. I only wish to repay her kindness for saving my life. Even if it is better for the world if I had not been saved, I am too selfish to ever be a martyr.

I was a few paces away from the stream when I turned around to see that she was watching me.

"I will be right back," I called.

She nodded, not following after me.

She was going to wait there; that was fine, probably better as I did not want to lead her into the unknown–into a place where she could get hurt.

Why do you care so much about protecting her? It's every pirate for himself.

But she had saved me. She was timid, and for some reason, I felt different around her. I could not quite name what it was about her that was different, but there was something. There was no one else there anyway.

I could do as I wished and not ruin my reputation as the infamous pirate, The Cruel Hand.

But do I even want that persona anymore? Especially if my uncle is dead? No, I do not.

Those thoughts were too deep, so I walked faster and focused on the sights around me. I needed to ensure our survival. I didn't have time for such ridiculous, contemplative thoughts or for my emotions. They were useless when I needed to survive.

Chapter Fifteen

Meria

Good, he is gone.

I waited until he was gone from my view before I turned and made my way back to the beach. I wobbled a few times as I moved fast, but was impressed with myself for not falling flat on my face. Legs were not all that bad, and Dominick seemed to like them, as he kept glancing at them. I smiled.

"Ancients, Meria! I was so worried about you. What happened?" I heard as I walked to the spot where Dominick and I had washed up. Finn was there in the water, just offshore with a frown on his face.

"I rescued a human, and now I have legs," I said, pointing to the obvious, new appendages.

"So it's true," he gasped, swimming closer.

"Yes, I will say they are rather easy to get used to," I said, making a point of balancing on one and showing him the underside of my foot.

"Impressive." Finn said with a grin and a nod.

“But I don’t know what to do here,” I said walking closer to Finn, my legs submerged up to my knees. He swam even closer to me in the shallow water. As Finn poked at my leg, I flinched.

“Feels so weird,” Finn said in awe. “No scales at all–just like skin.”

“Yes, I thought it was so strange, too. Please focus, Finn. What am I going to do? I have a human here!”

“Ask him if he can help you find your mother in Walden. Most humans who travel these seas have some connection to the Kingdom of Walden. If she’s on land, she’s most likely there, unless she is here–she isn't here, is she?"

“No, of course not! If she was, don't you think that would have been the first thing I told you?”

“My, you are in a mood.”

“I am on Marren Island with a human, and I have legs! Of course, I am in a *mood*, Finn! I am stressed,” I said, exasperated. “The island is small, and I walked around it. There are no obvious mer structures, but I found pearls, seashells, and some carvings in an underground cave of sorts. We were here.”

“I knew it!” Finn said, pumping his fist into the air. “Perhaps, your mother came here, and when she discovered *nothing*, she went to Walden. Like I said, it is the closest kingdom.”

“This is all happening so suddenly, Finn, and I know next to nothing about being a human.”

“You have to try. Of course, you could swim to Walden, but having a human connection already established could help us find your mother.”

“I can try, but he is strange.”

“Well, I am sure he is. You have never met a human before,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yes, but he–he has black veins in his hands and over his body, like some poison is flowing inside of him.”

Finn shrugged, “So heal him.”

“Should I really reveal *that* about me so soon?”

“Ah, you are right. You should feel the situation out, first. Trust your melody a bit more, though. Ancients know, you need practice with that. But from what I hear, you finally listened to your heart. I’m proud of you, Meria. The whole kingdom is talking about you defying your father and refusing Edmar and being banished.”

“It was awful.”

“It was good.”

“Was it? ‘Cause now I’m here with these!” I said, poking my legs.

“You’ll be okay. What's the human like?”

“He—” I was not about to tell Finn I thought he was handsome. No. “He is not as friendly as you are,” I said with a frown.

“What are you wearing?”

“He gave it to me. He wouldn't look at me unless I wore it,” I said, lifting up the black fabric from off my shoulder. It was very soft.

“Humans do cover up their skin all the time; I have seen it on the ships.”

We were silent for a few moments. The waves crashing against my legs were a comfort to me. I wondered why I was not changing back into a mermaid. Perhaps, I had to be submerged completely.

I missed my family, mostly my nieces and nephews.

“How are my sisters and my nieces and nephews?”

“They are okay; no one was hurt in the storm.”

“That’s good,” I said with a nod.

I was not allowed back home, and I couldn't stay on that island. I needed to find my mother and ask for her help to do–*what*? Force my father to see that we needed to rise out of the waters? Was that what we needed to do? Would he ever listen? At the very least, I wanted to meet her.

“Everything will be okay, Meria.”

“How can you say that, Finn, when everything is a disaster?”

“Easy, I like to be positive,” he said, splashing me. “Come in the water. I am sure your tail will come back once you fully submerge."

“I cannot just leave the human here. He is looking for a cave to shelter us. He is trying to take care of us. He thinks I have been stuck on this island for a while from another shipwreck. He is kind, but a little odd. He seems to really like water that is *not* from the sea,” I said with a shudder.

“It’s probably just because he is a human; they have different ways, different tastes than us. Become his friend; then he will take you to Walden.”

Finn was very set on that human taking me to Walden.

You should travel with him, my melody sang.

“I am not good at making friends.”

“I am your friend,” Finn said with a puffed out chest *and* a frown.

“You are, and yet you have to like me because you are my cousin.”

“Technically, I do not have to like you at all. I do not like Coral,” he said with a smirk.

I splashed water in his face, and he laughed.

“But seriously, come into the water all the way, and see if you get your tail back again.”

I stepped deeper into the waves, feeling a peace engulf me as I walked further and further into the waves, causing the almost dry fabric of Dominick’s clothing to become wet.

“Anything yet?” Finn asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I walked in deeper and deeper, and then I felt it as I was submerged to my waist.

Slowly, my two legs and feet merged together, becoming my teal tail again. I dove under the water with a smile. I breathed in the water and let it soak inside of me. The surface was beautiful and mysterious, but I had, dearly, missed the sea. It felt so wonderful. I swam toward Finn.

“That is so easy,” Finn said as I popped out before him. “You'd think it would require more.”

“I cannot tell you how much I missed the sea, even though it was only one day,” I said with a smile. Finn splashed my face. I splashed him back. “Finn, if I need to travel to Walden, you need to help get us rescued.”

“How do you believe I can manage that?” he asked.

“All you have to do is lead the humans, a human ship, to us. You know that no human can find Marren Island without the help of a mer.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll search for a ship from Walden. I am familiar with their flag. If I place bits of the wrecked ship in the water, like a trail, maybe they will follow it.”

“The human was worried about the people on board his ship. Do you know if any of the humans died?”

“A few died, but most of them survived; they had some smaller boats to save them.”

“Okay–”

“Meria?” I heard a shout from the shore and went back under the water.

“He's here!” I exclaimed to Finn with my melody.

“Go then. You need him to be your friend, right?”

“Well, yes, but I am not ready for him to know I am a mermaid till I know him better.”

“Are you sure he did not see your tail?”

“No, I woke up before him, and I was already human,” I said, shaking my head and biting my lip.

Finn popped his head out of the water, then came back down.

“He went away,” he sang.

I popped my head out and saw that he was no longer on the beach. Finn moved up beside me.

“Hurry up before he comes back,” he said, poking my back. I nodded and swam up onto the shore and pulled myself out of the water until my entire tail was out of the sea. In a few minutes, my tail disappeared, and my new legs and feet appeared. I stood and watched Finn wave to me, before diving under the sea.

“Ah, there you are–” I turned to see Dominick, walking toward me. “You had a swim?” he asked, and I looked down at his clothing, which I wore. It was wet and stuck to my body.

“Yes,” I said as he reached me.

“I found a cave. It’s actually really close–and empty, so I think it will be a safe place for the night. There is also a small pool, where the stream feeds into it, near the cave, and we can draw water there.”

I nodded.

“I think I can catch some fish if you can look for some wood for a fire?” he asked.

I nodded, not exactly sure where *wood* could be found.

I knew that human ships were made from wood and that wood often rotted under the sea. *Brown, wood is brown.* I walked around, picking up long, brown sticks from the ground. Once my arms were full of the wood, I made my way back to the cave. Dominick was not back yet, and I sat in the mouth of the cave, waiting and looking at my legs, which were covered in that brown sand. When he returned, he had a small smile on his face.

He held up a fish with his hand, then began to make his way to the cave. I looked at the fish’s tail as he carried it surrounded by air, so out of place, while I walked behind him. The scales reminded me of my own tail, and I wondered what he would do if he discovered that I was a mermaid. Would he want to spear me, too? No–humans wanted us alive for our magic. We ate sea life, too, although it was still a bit strange to see that fish in his hand–on land. I couldn't eat. The whole dynamic of that fish being eaten out of the water, seemed wrong. I felt sick.

“And you found–” He paused beside the pile of sticks I had collected and placed inside the cave. He frowned. I had not found the right wood, it seemed.

“Is this not good wood?” I asked.

“I am sure some of it will work,” he said as he kicked at a few pieces. It seemed that he favored the pieces that were not very wet. I tried to find the wettest wood I could. Perhaps, that was not the correct strategy.

“I have never made a fire before, but I would like to learn,” I said. He looked up from the wood pile.

“We need *dry* wood for a fire. I know that is probably difficult as this island is more tropical, and most everything is drenched in water. It is very humid here.”

I scrunched up my face. The island was so incredibly dry, and I had no idea what he was talking about. *Wet? He thinks the island is wet?* I watched him as he set the fish upon a rock and gathered up the dryest sticks and made a pile out of them in an odd shape.

“The fire needs air and wood,” he said, pointing to the sticks as if it would explain how they were arranged. I just nodded, fascinated by him. “You haven't had a fire since being stranded?”

I shook my head, *no*.

“Luckily, I still have this in my pocket,” he said, pulling out something black from his pocket with a wink.

My stomach did a flip, and my head felt light–as if I had just done a backflip. His eyes caught mine, and his lips tilted at their sides. I liked that look entirely too much. He looked back down at his hands, and I watched as he bent over, causing sparkles and tiny lights to spray over the wood. He leaned down and gently blew, and in a matter of moments, a yellowish, reddish-orange, rippling wave emerged from within the sticks, causing billowing clouds to rise above it. It moved and swayed, just as water did, and I had a desire to reach out and touch it. I moved closer, reaching out my hand, and the closer I got, the warmer it was. I wondered how close I could get before it burned me like the lava tubes within the ocean, but before I could see, Dominick pulled me back by my waist.

“Don’t touch it!” he said as if he were dumbfounded by my behavior.

“Beautiful,” I said with a smile still looking at the flames.

He moved his hands away from my waist.

“Did you injure your head when you were shipwrecked?” he asked as he began poking the fire with a stick.

“I believe so; things are confusing? I do not remember fire being so beautiful, and many other things; I am so sorry,” I said.

“I will help you as best I can.”

I felt my cheeks heat up as I looked at the flames, and I felt foolish. I must not have been acting very human. Perhaps, injuring my head was a good enough excuse for my strange, non-human behavior.

“Sorry,” I began again, but he looked at me, and I paused.

“Why are you sorry? You didn't do anything to me.” He brushed it off as he picked up the fish. I watched the fire grow and turn bright and yellow. It was so lovely. If only mer could have such a thing beneath the waves–that light and warmth could save my people. But, of course, that was foolish as it was impossible to bring that air-fire into the depths. Even the Marren Lights were not so beautiful. It reminded me of–

“You have captured the sun. Are you an *Ancient* human?” I asked, looking up at him with a playful smile.

“I am as far from an Ancient as can be,” he chuckled darkly.

“Oh–” I had no idea what to say or how to respond to him, so I was silent. He speared the fish with the stick he was holding, and set it over the fire.

“What does the *fire* do to the fish?” I asked in awe, watching as he turned it, and the scales glistened in the firelight. It was terrifying, yet beautiful. We used the heat from lava flows. Merpeople pressed injuries against the tubes to close their skin in order to stop the flow of blood when injured in the depths when using our healing magic was not possible.

“You truly do not remember what cooking is?” he asked, his eyebrows rising.

“No, I seem to have forgotten much,” I said, looking away from him. I hoped that I was believable.

“That is okay. The fire cooks it, heats it, so you can eat it."

“Oh, I usually just eat them as they are.”

“Raw? You are not from Walden, are you?"

“No, I do not believe so,” I said, and then I remembered what Finn had suggested. Become his friend, and have him take me to Walden. “I would like to *go* to Walden. My mother is there.”

“My mother, too,” he grumbled slightly under his breath.

“Are you hoping to return if we get rescued?” I asked.

“To Walden? Eventually, yes, I do need to go to Walden, but I have a mission to accomplish first.” He paused as he spoke and continued to focus on the fish, turning the stick.

“Mission?” I motioned for him to continue.

“My sister, I am looking for my sister. I believe she is across the Misted Seas.”

I gasped. No humans were allowed within the Misted Seas unless accompanied by a magical sea creature. Why was his sister beyond the Misted Seas? Even mermaids stayed away from there. Sirens were believed to dwell within those cooler waters and other terrifying sea creatures.

After a few more minutes of silence, he declared that the fish was cooked and then tore it in two, giving me a piece. I winced, trying not to compare myself to the fish. We were both quite vulnerable and out of our natural elements. I watched him as he ate it, and I wondered how he could eat that fish when it looked so unnatural, so horrible. I was starving, so I nibbled on it, but I had to spit it back out. It felt weird in my dry mouth and tasted awful and dry.

“You don’t like it?” he asked.

I shook my head, *no*.

“Okay, tomorrow, I am sure we can find you something you like, or you can have them raw if you'd prefer that.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a bit tired.

How do humans sleep without the lull of the ocean moving them, rocking them to sleep? It was so still and quiet in that cave.

“You can rest if you'd like. I'm sure you are tired.”

“Thank you,” I said, but did not move. After a little while, Dominick reclined on the cave floor, and I followed his lead. Humans slept laying down. It made sense because it would not be possible to sleep standing up. Although it was possible for merlings to sleep upright, I liked laying on my open clam shell. I missed it at that moment. The only noise was the flickering fire for a time before Dominick turned to look at me.

“If you get cold, please let me know. Body warmth is a great way to warm up. Don’t worry. While I would not call myself anything close to a gentleman, in this sense, I am,” he said.

“Gentle?” While he was not unkind, gentle seemed the completely wrong word to describe Dominick. He was strong, brave, and sure of himself.

“I can be if needed,” he said quickly.

“Okay, thank you, gentleman Dominick,” I said with a nod.

He laughed; it made his blue eyes so bright. It was a glorious sight.

“Sorry,” I said, slightly embarrassed, not knowing what I had said wrong. I was sure I did not sound at all like a human.

“No need to be sorry. I haven't laughed in a while; it felt nice.”

I followed his example and reclined on the other side of the fire, seeing his handsome face through the flickering, colorful flames.

“Goodnight, Meria.”

“Goodnight, Dominick.”

Chapter Sixteen

Dominick

The fire died sometime close to dawn, but I was too exhausted to add more wood. Luckily, it wasn't very cold, and I slept most of the night, even through my nightmares. I sat up and realized that Meria was gone. The sunlight woke me as it climbed high enough to shine into the cave. I stood up and walked around the cave, looking for her; then, I went outside. When I spotted her wild, blond-pink hair, I breathed in deeply with relief. I hated how quickly I had come to care about the safety of that maiden. It was clear that she was in great need of help, and being the only other person on the magical island of Marren, that had to be the reason I cared about her well-being. She was the only other person there, and I did not want to be alone.

But why would being alone be a problem? You like being alone.

I shook my head to dislodge my thoughts. I had awakened that morning, feeling the same lingering pains from the many people whose pain I had taken upon myself–as well as the ones I had tortured, but with needing to make sure Meria was alright, I'd been distracted from the pain. Seeing her safe caused the pain to slowly trickle back up my arms and down my back.

I clenched my fists and my jaw, waiting for the pain to ebb away–at least, the intensity of it; it was never truly gone. I stretched out my arms above my head. It did not help with the pain, but it did distract me from it. I found that distractions were the best thing for pain; hence, trying to find Meria had distracted me that morning.

Meria is a good distraction, which is probably why I also care about her well-being.

That is it.

She was easy to spot in the dark jungle in the dim morning light. In her hands, she had a white sail. She was smiling as she turned around to face me. I felt my own lips curl upwards. Joy was all over her beautiful face, and somehow, that large grin transplanted itself onto my mouth, too.

Smiles are contagious, I told myself. *But, when Sands smiles, you don't smile–or when–*

I shoved my useless and unhelpful thoughts to the side and focused on Meria. It did not matter the reasons I smiled, or acted kind, or cared for that maiden. We were alone. I could do whatever and be whoever I wanted. She was beautiful, yes, and I, as a pirate, loved jewels and gold and other glistening, beautiful things, so it made sense that I was drawn to her, like she was a treasure, and I wanted to keep her safe.

See, that is all. I sighed, feeling relief wash through me.

"I have this from a ship. We can use it for the cave." Her words shook my ridiculous thoughts away.

"The floor of the cave is that uncomfortable for you?" I asked with a small smile. She was talking more than she had before. Perhaps, with time, she would warm up to me.

"Well, the sand on the shore would have been more comfortable," she said. "But everything is so still here; it is hard to sleep."

"But there would be no protection from the elements if we slept on the sand. What do you mean by 'still'?"

"Oh, true, and um, I just mean–" She didn't finish the sentence. She appeared embarrassed, so I went on.

"You must be speaking of the movement while on a ship. I miss the lull of the ship, too. Where did you find it?" I asked, pointing to the sail.

"On the other side of the island, there is a broken ship."

"A ship?"

"Yes, a wreck."

“Oh, I should look at that. See if there is anything else we can make use of.”

“It is interesting. But, most things here are.”

“Do you think your family will send rescue for you?” I knew I wouldn’t be rescued, and I did not want to spend the rest of my days on a magical island, even if I was with that beautiful woman.

“My father is not searching for me, of that, I am sure,” she said.

Why? Why would her father not search for her?

“I am sure he is looking for you as well as he is able.”

“He banished me; I refused to do as he asked,” she said with a frown.

“What did he ask?” I asked her, and she frowned again. Maybe, that was too forward.

“Something impossible. My father is so stubborn and stuck in his ways!” she nearly shouted as she dropped the ripped white sail she had been holding.

“You can yell? I did not know you had it in you, Meria,” I said playfully, and I was not going to think about how out of character it was for me to tease a maiden.

“Sorry–” She quickly bent down and picked up the sail. “I did not mean to be–”

“Upset? I understand; truly, parents can be rather horrid. My mother, for example, sent me away, too. We do not call it ‘banishment,’ but now that I think of it, that is what I am–‘banished’ from her and from my home.”

“So you are not able to travel to Walden?”

“I can, but not to the palace–not yet, anyway, not until I find my sister.”

Why in the fathoms am I telling her these things? These things that I just barely told Sands after knowing him for years.

“While I am grateful to not be under my father’s control, I do miss my home,” she said in her normal voice.

“Yes, this place–not very homey, is it?” I asked. There was a pause between us as she looked around, shaking her head, *no*.

“I seem rather useless on land,” she said with a huff, and her shoulders slumped.

“You sound like me. I always feel more at home on a ship. Have you spent most of your life

at sea?” I asked.

“Oh–yes, the sea, it is home,” she said slowly. Her hair was also all over the place, I noticed, as I walked closer to her. That hair, I was certain, would take an entire day to untangle. “What?” she asked as I must have been staring too long.

“Oh, nothing.”

“That is a lie—sharks got your tail, there,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows up and down, ridiculously.

Such a strange saying. She was strange, though, and I could not help but be grateful that she was speaking more.

“It is only your hair,” I said.

She reached up and tried to run her fingers through her blond tangles.

Without much thought, I picked at my jacket and produced a comb, handing it to her. There were only a few things I always kept on me: my flint, a comb, a knife, my flask, and my gloves. I still had three out of the five.

“I’m—oh–thank you,” she said, confused. She held it up to her face and took her finger and ran it along the bristles.

“It’s a comb, you know, for your hair—” I said, touching the top of my head.

“Oh, yes. I know—usually my hair floats about, but here–” She stopped herself, covering her mouth with her hand. “Sorry, I do not know what I am saying.”

“That’s okay, but you do not have to keep apologizing. You are not offending me.”

“Oh—sorry,” she winced.

“You have a problem, Meria. You are apologizing to me for apologizing.” I wiggled my eyebrows, and she laughed. Her cheeks were dark with embarrassment, but she seemed happy.

“Gentleman humans are kind,” she said. She had such a strange way of speaking. She must have been from a distant kingdom.

“Do you have siblings?” I wanted to change the topic.

“Yes, I am the youngest of six sisters.”

“I see. That is a large family.”

“Yes, what about you? Is it just you and your one sister who is lost?”

Before I could think better of it, I shook my head side to side. “I also have a brother; he lives in Walden. I haven't seen him in a long time.”

“I hope that changes soon.”

“What?” I was startled.

“I hope you get to see him soon. And I hope you’ll find your sister.”

“Thank you.”

“It is so dry here,” she said with a laugh.

“If you are thirsty, we can go to the stream,” I said as she stuck the comb in her hair with a smile attempting to untangle her locks.

We made our way silently to the stream where we both drank and then walked back to the cave. Meria got to work, first setting the ripped sail on the ground where we had slept the night before. I watched her as she sat down and pulled the comb from her hair and attempted to comb her hair with it some more.

“Can I help you?” I asked, walking closer to her and reaching for the comb. With defeat, she nodded.

I pulled the comb from her hair and picked up a section of her curls. I lightly combed through them. I did not know exactly what I was doing, but I had this strange urge to help her and touch her hair. I knew it was dangerous without my gloves, so I made sure with every single stroke that my bare fingers were only in her hair, and that her skin was far away.

“Oh, I see. That is helping,” she said faintly as I moved through another section after placing a tamed section over her shoulder. I went behind her and continued to comb out her long, beautiful hair. I had never seen such light blond hair, and the pinkish hue in places was incredibly unique. Although tangled, her hair was incredibly soft. As I touched the strands, it almost soothed my pain–made it feel as if it would go away entirely if I continued to touch her.

“I have never done this before, so hopefully, I am helpful.”

“You are helpful. Thank you, and I am so sorry for this.”

“Meria—” I said as I pulled out a piece of seaweed from her hair.

“What?”

“‘*Sorry’*–Do not keep apologizing. It seems you have a nasty habit.”

“Oh, sorry–” She froze, and I chuckled. She turned to look at me, over her shoulder, and I placed my hands in my lap. Our eyes connected, and I smiled.

“A *habit* I will help you break,” I said.

She nodded, then turned back around, and after my heart began to beat normally, I continued to brush her hair.

“My father liked it when I did as he asked, and when I did not–well, I had to apologize right away, and *then* do as he asked.”

“Well, here on our little island, you do not have to apologize to me for existing and needing help.”

“Thank you.”

Once I was done with her hair, I stepped back. She ran her fingers through it in surprise. She jumped and turned to hug me. I found myself wrapping my arms around her. Then I stopped, pushing her away, remembering that I had no gloves, and I had just been touching her hair *and* her *skin*.

“Are you alright?” I asked, putting my hands behind my back.

She looked at me strangely.

“I am fine. What is wrong, Dominick?” she asked, and I could hear the worry in her voice.

“I–I should not be touching you without my gloves. I am so sorry–”

“Should I be wearing gloves, too?” she asked.

“No–but *I* need to wear them–”

“Why? Does it have something to do with the black veins on your arms?”

“Yes–I am *cursed*.”

“Cursed! By an Ancient?” she gasped. “But how? Only human royals are cursed.”

“It is possible; I was born a royal, although I am not a royal anymore; I am a pirate.”

“A prince–a cursed prince–” she said with fear in her eyes.

I hated that expression on her face.

“What is your curse?” she asked.

“I cause pain, and I can also take it away.” *Why am I telling her everything so easily?*

“How?”

“By touching someone,” I said.

“Which is why you wear gloves?”

“Yes,” I said, glancing at the cave floor.

“But–I was not in pain when you touched me,” she said. She walked up to me and reached her hand out as if to pull my hand to hers–

“No–please–I could kill you.”

“What do you mean? You just touched me a moment ago–nothing happened.”

“I do not want to test it,” I said gruffly. I felt bad as I had let go of the darkness while on the island, but remembering my curse, seemed to bring it back. When had I last been in such a dire situation that it caused me to forget my curse?

Never.

“I will be back later,” I said as I walked away from the cave and kept walking until I was at the waves on the shore.

Chapter Seventeen

Meria

"They are coming; I think it will be about a week. Ships are slower than we are," Finn said from the small pool where we sat, near the sunken ships I had found on the third day I spent on the island. I went there as often as I could. The little pool was surrounded by rocks, creating a good hiding spot in case Dominick was ever nearby. It had been twelve days on Marren Island, and the time spent with Dominick was so different than when I was with Finn, or Edmar, the only other males I had spent significant time with. I liked Dominick, I did. There was a roughness to him I had never before seen. And yet, he was kind, not at all like the humans Father spoke of. I felt like our friendship was growing. For a human, he was not at all what I had expected. It was interesting how I preferred Dominick's company way more than I ever did Edmar's. *Is that not odd?* I had known Edmar most of my life, and I had not liked him right away. Perhaps, I simply enjoyed being around Dominick because he was a human, and it was so weird to be with a human. I swished my tail back and forth. It felt so good to be myself again. I missed the sea every day, even though it was just

a short walk from our cave. I had to be careful that Dominick did not see me when I transformed back into a mermaid. I was not yet sure it was wise to let him know *what* I was. Part of me wanted to, but I could also still hear my father's voice in my head, telling me how horrible humans were. But I had to slip away to release my tail. If I did not go into the water, at least every other day, my legs ached as if they needed a break, and I could feel my *tail* wanting to emerge. It had been far too long since Finn had last come, and I was grateful for him being there on that day.

"Good, although I am not sure Dominick can help."

"But you said he is the Walden Prince," Finn said.

"Yes, but he was banished, just like me, at least until he finds his sister, he said."

"Maybe you could help him find his sister? If you did that, then he would have to help you find your mother," Finn said with excitement.

It was a good idea. And if Dominick wanted to go across the Misted Seas, the only way he could even find them was with a magical sea creature, a mermaid–like me.

"That actually is a good idea, Finn." It did mean one thing; I would have to reveal that I was a mermaid.

"I have splendid ideas from time to time," Finn said with a smile.

"How are things in Marren?"

"Everyone is *fine*. I miss you, Meria; Everyone is so uptight in Marren."

"I am uptight," I said with a knowing look.

He laughed, "Yes, maybe at court and with your father and sisters–but not with me."

"Thanks, Finn, I've missed you, too. This is so nice," I said, stretching out before diving into the water. Finn joined me beneath the surface.

"Keep checking the horizon. I am sure you'll see the ship. They are slow, so maybe not for a few days." Finn swam up to the edge of the little rock pool as if he were going back into the ocean.

"What are you doing?" I said, swimming closer to him as if I could prevent his leaving.

"I am on patrol," he said, looking back at me before sliding back into the ocean. I popped out of the water and he smiled, turning around to face me. "I cannot spend all my time here. I don't want anyone to become suspicious. The last thing we need is your father sending a merman here to

hunt you down. Where would Marren be without you? We need you, Meria."

"Are the lights?" I asked, biting my lip.

"Still dimming. More mer are sick. I will come as soon as I can," he said with a smile, and he dove from our little hidden pool and into the ocean below.

I sank to the bottom of the sandy pool's floor. I watched the sun ripple through the water's movements from the waves entering and leaving the pool. It was relaxing to watch, and the heavy weight of the water was a comfort I had missed while on land. My heart ached. I would do all in my power to save my people, even if I had to reveal myself to a human, and take Dominick to the Misted Seas. I would do anything.

After a few minutes at the bottom of the pool, I resurfaced, and floated with my eyes closed. I was tired. It was difficult to sleep in the cave. I wished I could have gone to that pool to sleep each night, but Dominick would become suspicious. I was also worried about leaving him alone. Many nights, I woke up to him groaning in his sleep as if in pain. I wondered how he endured such a horrible curse. My mind focused on his handsome face, on his smile, and the way he and I had formed an easy friendship on the island. After asking to touch his hands that second day, he had not been as talkative and close with me, but I hoped with time, he would talk more, once again. I could be patient if I needed to be. I let the movement of the ocean lull me to a peaceful state.

"Meria?!" I opened my eyes to the crashing of waves on rocks and the feeling of being rocked slightly. I smiled. There was nothing like the ocean, and I loved it. My tail shifted with the movement. I moved it back and forth, trying to figure out whose voice was calling me, sleep still fogging my brain.

Where am I?

“Meria?” The voice called again, and when I heard it for the third time, that was when I twisted my head to the side to see a pair of widened, dark blue eyes staring down at me. His brown hair was wild as it blew in the sea breeze, and he was looking from my tail to my face in shock.

“Oh, Hi, Dominick,” I said, feigning calm as I pulled myself onto a rock and removed my tail fully from the water. I wanted to cover my tail, but there was no reason; he had seen it. All I could do was hope I would change back soon.

How am I to navigate this situation? I wondered.

“You are a *mermaid*?” he asked as I sat there, waiting for my legs to return.

“I am,” I said softly.

I did not dare look into his eyes, nor even wait a moment for him to say something. My legs had returned. I stood. His face was still frozen in surprise, his mouth opening and closing. Unsure what to do, and being the coward that I am, I ran from the rocks to the beach. There was no other place to go. I was stuck on that island with Dominick. I mean, I could have swam away, but he was my connection to Walden. Not only that, but he was a Walden prince. I was sure that him being royalty would help me find my mother that much more efficiently. I needed him, and since he knew I was a mermaid, to achieve his goals, he needed me. I sank into the warm sand and waited for Dominick to find me.

He walked slowly from the rocks to the beach. I still couldn't look at him, so I focused on the waves pulling in and out of the cove. Dominick sank down beside me.

“You are a mermaid, not stranded on this island. I’m on this island because *you,* a *mermaid, saved* me?” he asked.

“Please, do not hurt me,” I said, trying to make myself as small as possible by wrapping my arms around my knees that were pulled up to my chest. I turned my head to watch him.

He whipped his head around to look at me. “What? Why would you say that?” His voice was rougher than I had ever heard it before, and I moved backward.

“I know about humans; they killed us–kept us prisoner when King Falcon ruled.”

“Oh–King Falcon, *may he rot in the mountain*, is dead. He has been dead for over five hundred years.” He paused, then added, “Most humans don’t

even believe that mermaids exist anymore. They are considered to be myths. I am still not sure if I truly saw you with a tail or not, just now," he said, shaking his head.

"I am a mermaid. I do have a tail," I said with a smile, looking at him. His eyes were transfixed on my legs.

"Does it–did it *hurt* to change?"

"No, it just feels like stretching," I said.

"I will not hurt you, Meria," Dominick said in a voice I had never heard from him. His tone was not only quiet, but he sounded as if he cared deeply for me and that he wanted me to understand what he said and that he needed me to know that he truly meant it. I was not sure how someone could deduce such a thing from a simple phrase, but I not only *heard* his words, I *felt* them within my soul, even though he had no melody. I was surprised by it and looked into his eyes.

"Thank you. You have been very kind to me, even when I do not understand human things. My cousin said a ship should be here to rescue us. I guess I can tell you that, now."

"Do you know whose ship it is?"

"He said he was looking for a Walden ship."

Dominick tensed, and I placed a hand upon his shoulder, which he shook off and stood up.

"I cannot go on a ship from Walden."

"Yes, you can. I am sure it will be alright. My cousin also told me they picked up another sailor from your ship's crew; his name was rather odd: Shifts or Sends. He likes to listen to what he can from humans."

"Sands?" he asked.

"Maybe that was it."

"Perhaps, I can board—If he is there, that helps," he said, sinking down onto the sand with his face in his hands. "We have challenges ahead of us, Meria."

"Can you keep my identity as a mermaid secret from other humans?"

"Of course, I will tell no one." He paused, and I watched as he played with the sand, letting it pile in his palm before spreading his fingers wide to let it pour out. He did it again and again. The sight of his hands and arms, even the part of his chest that was exposed, was familiar to me, then, even with the strange black veins, dark under his skin. I looked at his face, which was focused on the sand, when he asked: "So, there really are mermaids?"

“There is an entire underwater kingdom. My people don’t know that we can have legs when on land. This island, I believe, used to be where we lived long ago when we transformed into our human form. But no mer has come out of the sea since the Great War–other than my mother; at least, I believe she has. My people need help. The lights of Marren are dimming, and I am afraid that without replacing them, my people will be engulfed in complete darkness–and the horrible things which are beginning to happen to the merpeople will become universal and destroy us all.” I tried not to think about the horrible things happening to my people.

“I am sure the people aboard this rescue ship can help you get to Walden and find your mother.”

“I was hoping *you* could help me.”

“I am grateful for your rescue, Meria, and for the company here–and the ship that will rescue us, but I do have things I must take care of.”

“Yes–like finding your sister. I know, and I can help. If you thought that mermaids were just legends, that means you have heard some old stories, and in those old tales, it was told that the Misted Seas could not be crossed without the assistance of a magical sea creature–and *I* am that creature. You need me.”

“While, yes, I have heard the legends, why would you do such a thing for me?”

“I mean, you are very kind and have helped me so much.”

“Sure, but what is in it for you? You seem the kind of person who can be easily used because you are so–” He paused and looked at me thoughtfully.

“I am so–*what*?”

“Quiet–shy, possibly? I have not decided yet, but instead of using you, people should keep you safe.” He whispered that last word, and it sent a tingle through me. “The Misted Seas are *not* safe, Meria.”

“No, not for humans without a sea creature. You need me, and how did you–why do you believe that I’ve been used?”

“You are reserved, kind, and accommodating. You apologize far too much. The wrong people will exploit that.”

“You have not.”

“If given the opportunity, I would, Meria, which is another reason why you should stay as far away from me as possible. I am not a good man.”

“Yes, you are. A bad human would not have helped me.”

“Maybe, but I am still *not*—good.”

“Dominick, you are right. My father used me. I was always obedient. I didn’t follow my own heart, ever. I did all he asked of me. He matched me with a merman, who I did not love, and I would have married him and never risen from the sea, but when this merman kissed me–” I touched my lips.

“Kissed you?” Dominick interrupted, startled, looking from the waves and over to me.

I felt my cheeks get hot and nodded. “Humans kiss, also?” I asked

“Yes—humans do,” he said slowly, his voice deep.

“Yes, it was nothing, only a simple kiss, and it turns out that my sisters lied when they said that kisses are magical,” I shrugged. “And truly, kisses are not as spectacular as everyone seems to think they are.”

“Sounds like he did an *excellent* job of *kissing* you,” he grunted, his words dripping in obvious sarcasm, which made me smile. “You need the kiss of a real *man*.”

“A man? Do you think humans kiss differently?”

“Yes,” he said with a shrug. His word was confident, but his shrug made him appear unsure. Why I felt the need to spill out all my life problems to him, I did not understand, but once I began, I could not stop.

“It was nothing special,” I said. “Then he said that he did not want any children–and I *love* children. Those two things made me think that maybe my father did not know what was best for me, after all. Everything else about Marren, and my entire world shook apart after that. And now, I have discovered that mer can be human, too.”

“Those are two rather large things to have differing opinions on. I assume your fiance enjoyed the kiss?”

“He did say that he did.”

Dominick nodded. “And, *of course*, you love children; that suits you–kind, sweet, way too soft to be out here in this world. If you were in my world, Meria, it would ruin your goodness and sweetness. All the sweet and gentle things that you are would become hard and jagged,” Dominick said with a grunt, scratching his jaw. “I can see why your father tried to protect you.” He paused. “Although he didn’t protect you, did he? He placed you in a prison, and prisons don’t keep us safe.”

“It was not a prison. I lived in a palace.”

“Even a *beautiful* prison is a prison, and a prisoner is what you are if you cannot do as you desire.”

“I never thought about that. But I am *not* soft.”

“It is not a bad thing to be soft, Meria. I am rough and hardened by the bad things in this world. Believe me, that is a compliment, coming from me.”

I was not sure exactly what that meant, but I nodded and went on with my story. It felt good to get it all out. “I refused to marry him, and then I was banished for telling my father that mermaids might have the ability to have legs. ‘We do not speak of such things,’ he said. ‘It is treason.’ My mother–she was banished for the same thing, I believe. For my entire life, I did not know all the reasons as to why she had been banished. But now I understand: she was banished, trying to save our people. All this time, I was led to believe that she had betrayed our kind—but she had not.”

“I wish I could help you.”

“I need to find her. You *can* help me; you can help me find her in Walden.”

“I told you–I am banished from Walden.”

“Yes, but if you come back with your sister, you will no longer be banished, right? Then you can help me. I am sure the royals have records, and that they could help me locate my mother.”

He paused as if thinking. I watched him. His profile as he looked at the waves was very attractive. It was strange because he was so different from Edmar–the man I had believed was so perfect. Edmar really was perfect by mermaid standards. I had no idea what humans considered perfect in a male, but I was starting to discover that there was something perfect in the imperfection that was Dominick. As odd as it sounded, it felt right sitting there and telling him everything. My soul was pleased to be with him. It was more obvious than ever before; that man before me–that human–was better than Edmar. He cared about my safety as Edmar did, but it was different. He did not belittle who I was. He liked that I loved children, that I was kind, even reserved. But I had been sheltered all my life from the world, and I was ready to experience what was out there, even if it changed me.

Dominick turned his head, and I felt my cheeks warm as his eyes locked onto mine. They were so dark, so blue, like the depths of the fathoms below the surface of the ocean, and I wanted to get lost inside of them. He lifted his lips into a very attractive smile. I took that as a good sign.

“So do we have an agreement? I help you cross the Misted Seas and help you find your sister, and then, you help me find my mother?”

“Are you sure this is what you want? Once you see what evil is in this world, I am afraid you can never go back to the time when you did not know about it.”

“I have spent most of my life sheltered from anything but what my father wanted. I am ready to choose for myself what I do, even if that brings me into danger.”

“If we do this, I will do all in my power to keep you safe, but I won’t be able to keep all the horrors of the human world from you.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. So? Are we in agreement?”

There was a long silence. I looked at Dominick, and he looked at me.

I watched as a small smirk appeared at the left side of his mouth.

“Well, I do need a mermaid, and you are so conveniently here–” he said with sparkling eyes of what appeared to be mischief, although there was nothing mischievous about it. It was a handsome, playful glint within his eyes. It made my stomach feel as if I was caught up in a wave, spinning and then crashing upon the shore. Yet, somehow, it was not painful–or even scary, only—exhilarating.

This is right.

“So, Meria, how would you feel about that? Being my mermaid? If I claim you as mine, that will keep you safe from other men, at least,” he said with a wink.

“Claim?”

“Do mermen not claim mermaids?”

“I mean, I guess so.”

“I think it best if we make it clear that you are mine. Just so you know, I may have been born Prince Dominick of Walden, but I have not been that for a long time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am a pirate. I have done many bad things, and I will continue to do bad things in the future, I can assure you. I am not like your well-behaved and obedient betrothed.”

“I do not want you to be like him.”

“So, you are okay with me being a pirate? I am not a kind pirate,” he said, running his hand over his jaw, which was covered in scruff. It was getting thicker every day.

“Whatever you must do,” I said, too curious to say more.

He nodded and leaned back on his hands in the sand, stretching out his booted feet in front of him. I was still holding my knees to my chest but slowly removed them.

“I am curious about Pirate Dominick,” I said.

“First thing you should know, is that I do not go by Dominick. My name is The Cruel Hand.”

“The Cruel Hand? But you don't touch anyone.” I paused and looked to the sea. He told me that he was cursed to inflict pain on those he touched. Did that mean–?

“My hand is cruel and unpleasant when I touch someone. I have a reputation.”

“You *torture* people?” I asked, looking at the waves for a few heartbeats, then turning my head to look at him again. It was hard to believe that man, who was kind and helpful and had that bright light in his eyes, could willingly torture anyone.

“Yes, I told you–I am a pirate. I am not a prince, not anymore. Still wish to journey with me?”

As much as that news was not pleasant, I felt as if there was something else he was not telling me. I could not deny that going with him seemed to be the right choice, even if it was dangerous. I was already banished, so I had the freedom to do as I wished. I wished to stay with Dominick. It felt like the right choice, and I was trying to do what felt right to me, instead of what I was told was best for me.

Yes.

“Will you be my mermaid, Meria?”

I gulped.

“I *will* be your mermaid, and *you* will be my human.”

Chapter Eighteen

Dominick

Our life on the small island had been pleasant. Knowing that Meria was a mermaid explained so much. After that revelation, she wasn't as shy as she had been. She spoke often and explained more about her underwater kingdom. I couldn't help but stare at her tail whenever she went for her swims. Her tail was beautiful. The teal color suited her, and I was growing more and more comfortable with her, which worried me.

I was not looking forward to our rescue for many reasons, one of the main ones was that the little bubble of ours, where I did not have to act a specific way, would then be broken. I would most likely have to behave like a pirate again, and I was not sure how Meria would react to that persona.

Will she fear me?

When I first found out that she was a mermaid, the look of fear on her face gave me a sharp pain in my chest, which was not a place I usually felt pain, unless I was thinking about Walden and my family. I would never hurt Meria. I tried to explain to her what it meant that I was a pirate and that I did horrible things. I was not looking forward to her seeing me behave as

The Cruel Hand, which reality caused me to curse my mother's name under my breath more than once, along with Veeto's, who I hoped had already met his watery end.

Being free from Veeto and his awful crew, it felt like a weight had been lifted from off my back. As much as I never wanted to be The Cruel Hand again, I knew that I had a reputation and that it would follow me as long as I remained a pirate.

I liked the way Meria looked at me so joyfully. Would that fade once she realized what I had to do to survive? I attempted to kick that train of thought away as often as it floated into my mind.

Three more days passed, and still no ship had arrived. I was sure mermaids were not aware of how fast or slow ships traveled.

Our sleeping arrangement changed over those few days. Since our talk on the beach, there were a few times when I had awakened to feel Meria right beside me, her hand on my shoulder. As I opened my eyes, I would see her eyes searching for mine in the dark, often as tears dripped down her cheeks.

"What is the matter?" *Did I touch her? Did I use the curse in my sleep?* My heart raced with that fear the first time I found her beside me, crying.

She shook her head, *no*, and dipped her head to hide her eyes.

"Meria, talk to me," I said, sitting up in the dark cave, where a small flicker of the fire still burned.

"You–you are in pain, Dominick?"

"I was sleeping."

"Dominick, there is no way–I mean, do you have nightmares?" she asked quietly. Her hand rubbed my shoulder.

"I do–but I am alright. Sorry I woke you up."

"You always wake me up. I think you are in more pain than you say."

I have been waking her up during my nightmares? As much as I did not want to admit how much pain I was constantly in, it was truly awful. But why make her worry needlessly for me and the horror that was my curse?

She was dealing with enough. There was no need to burden her with that. I was strong, and I could handle the pain. She–while I had learned that her life was not easy and that she had her fair share of things she had endured, and was strong, herself–she deserved someone keeping her from more pain. Was it wrong to not want her tainted by me? She was kind, and I knew that if I told her everything, that she was the kind of person to make it her mission to save me.

I would love to be without pain, but that is not for her to fix.

"The curse hurts. I am sorry my nightmares affect you. I can sleep somewhere else if you think–"

"No–" she interrupted as I began to move as if to stand. "Please, I can help you." She reached out for me.

"No," I grunted, standing even though her hand clasped onto my coat tighter. I tugged until she released me, and I walked to the mouth of the cave.

"I can heal you. I have healing magic," I heard her cry out to me.

Meria had told me stories that her people had passed down since the Great War. Humans had taken mermaids hostage for their magical healing abilities, but that came at a great cost to the mermaids. I did not know exactly what it took from them to heal another, and I did not know if she could heal an Ancient's curse. Curses were most likely too powerful for that; I would never ask it of her.

I should have been kinder that night when she first woke me up, but I wasn't kind. It was better she found out on the island than later after we were rescued, I reasoned.

After that night, I still woke up from nightmares, at times, like I usually did during the night, but Meria was always near me. Sometimes, the pains manifested as grotesque nightmares, wherein I felt as if I were those people whose pain I had taken. I twitched, and I knew that I groaned and grunted in my sleep. However, we never spoke about it again. Meria was still beside me each time I woke up–constantly beside me–steadily, her warmth brought me back to the cave where we were and away from the pains I had taken from people–and also inflicted. Our eyes connected. Often she cried, and I wished I could wipe those tears away, but I had no gloves and would never take a chance on hurting Meria. So I looked at her, our eyes locking, and a small, sad smile covered her face, her tears dripping onto my arm.

In the dark, I nodded to her after our eyes connected, and I shifted, feeling her hand making circular movements on my arm until I fell asleep. And after I woke up like that and then fell back asleep with Meria beside me, the nightmares went away for the rest of the night.

However, the third night was the most different of all.

We ate dinner, as we always did, by firelight. I cooked a fish, and Meria ate some seaweed and a small part of the cooked fish, although she didn't particularly enjoy it. After dinner, we retreated to the cave floor to sleep. Meria placed the white sail underneath us, along with some sand to cushion us from the hard floor. It was a large improvement. As I was settling down in my spot, I felt Meria beside me; she was very close. Her side was pressed against my back.

"What are you doing?" I asked, turning my head to see her there.

"So, I am cold tonight and wondered if I could lay beside you, now, instead of waking up in the night, shivering and then laying beside you."

It was true, we always ended up close anyways, so I did not see a problem with it.

"That's fine." I said, turning back around to face the cave wall. She shifted a little bit, and I tried to not move even an inch.

"I don't like sleeping on land; it's so different," she whispered.

"How so?"

"The lack of movement. The constant movement of the waves always rocked me to sleep," she said.

"It's like that on a ship–it rocks back and forth. Some sailors do not like it, but I miss that."

"That is promising, when the ship comes."

I was on my back and turned my head to look over at her back. She was on her side, facing the small fire. I watched as my chest rose and fell, rhythmically back and forth. I had an idea, and my heart fluttered. It had been doing that often around Meria, which was new to me.

"Come here–" I began. She turned onto her other side, looking at me.

"What?" she asked, confused.

I turned to my side, facing her. "Press your back against my chest. I have an idea."

She shifted, and her back pressed against my chest. My hands twitched beneath me, desiring to wrap themselves around her and pull her in closer for warmth.

“Like this?” she asked with her back pressed against my chest.

“Yes, perfect. Close your eyes.” I shifted a little bit, gathering part of the sail and wrapping it around one of my hands. I pressed it against her back and rocked her slightly, back and forth.

She chuckled. “Dominick, you are a genius, but you can’t do this all night.”

“I’ll rock you to sleep. Then I will fall asleep. You deserve a good night’s rest.”

“So do you–”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said, still rocking her ever so slightly. Her hair smelled of salt and sand and a sea breeze, and I was taken back to the sea.

It only took a few minutes before her breaths were even, and she was asleep. I stopped rocking her, but moved closer so my chest was pressed against her back again, hoping that the slight movement of my chest as I breathed would be comforting to her.

When I woke up to the sun shining into the cave, it was the first time I could remember sleeping through the night and not waking up with residual pain from some dream. There was something heavy on my chest, and as I opened my eyes, I realized I was laying on my back–and Meria’s head was there on top of me. Her hand was clasped in mine, and for a moment, I thought about how comforting it was, and then I froze. My hand was touching her skin. I jumped back, waking her.

“What is the matter?” she said, looking at me as I hunched in the corner of the cave with my hands spread wide.

“Are you alright? Are you hurting?”

“Yes, I am alright. I slept really well last night. But–”

“What is it, Dominick?”

I looked at my hands, then at her.

Was I just holding her hand? Really? Maybe I was too tired and *wanted* to hold her that night, so I only dreamed I was holding her hand. Deep down, I knew that it was true. Still, there was no need to tell her; she was fine, but why? How? No one had ever been fine after touching me before.

“Sorry, I just–”

“You didn’t wake up last night as you usually do,” she said.

“No, I did not.”

She smiled and stood up, straightening my shirt, which she still wore belted around her waist. I felt different, and as she walked from the cave to

get a drink of water, I leaned against the cave wall, just staring at my hands until she ran back into the cave.

"Dominick! The ship is here!"

I needed to get it together. I could no longer be the Dominick she knew. I had to be a pirate. And why did I feel no pain? I needed to feel pain—know that I had not given my pain to Meria. But she was fine. Meria was fine.

I had a plan. We had a plan, and soon, we would be on a ship, and I would be one step closer to finding my sister and getting my revenge and then living my own life, being the pirate I was, no matter what Meria thought about me because of it.

Chapter Nineteen

Meria

So many things seemed to be happening all at once. One moment, I was on the beach, waving at the ship in the distance, calling for Dominick to come over; then, there was a small boat coming at me from the ship.

"They are coming. Are you ready with our story?" Dominick asked.

I turned to him, his hair blowing in the sea breeze, covering one eye. "Um, what do you mean?" I asked.

He turned toward me, away from the small boat. "You are *my* maiden. I need to make sure they know that, so no harm comes to you."

"Alright, like we are betrothed?"

Dominick choked.

"Not necessarily." He squeezed and unsqueezed his fists. I looked at the black veins there. Although I wondered about his curse, and how it worked, those veins added something to him that I liked. Maybe that was strange, but they fit him. Even though they were probably the painful result of his curse.

“I need to get gloves as soon as possible,” he whispered, not to me, but into the wind. The small boat rocked over a larger wave, and in only a few moments, we would be able to see their faces.

“Do not forget what I told you. I am a pirate. I may do things that startle you, but they are for our own good.”

I looked at him, his once kind expression, although hard at times, was gone–and a smirking, pained one was left in its place.

“I am not afraid of you, Dominick.”

“I am afraid that you will be.”

“Hello, there!” one of the men called from the boat. I looked into the waves and the small, rocking, wooden boat. There were only three men inside. “We are coming onto the island,” a young man, younger than myself or Dominick, said from the front of the boat. His eyes were wild with excitement, a beautiful dark blue, and his hair was dark brown and falling into his eyes a bit. He wore very fine clothing, too. He had a very dark blue jacket with gold trim and details. It looked like the sunshine was sewn right into the fabric. There was a small crest on the side of the little boat, that of an anchor and a shark swimming behind it.

“Walden,” Domnick grunted from beside me.

The other man on the boat was closer in age to Dominick and I with very deeply tanned skin, black hair, and a rather striking face. He was handsome, not as handsome as Dominick, but attractive in his own way. His hair whipped in the wind, and when he turned to the side, it seemed he had pulled back some of it. He wore very weathered clothes, similar to Dominick’s: a shirt, brown vest, pants, and coat. He stood and waved.

“Of course, he really did make it out alive,” Dominick said beside me with a chuckle.

“Do you know that man?”

“Sands. I was right; that’s who this Walden ship rescued. He was a pirate with me on the Crimson Blade.”

“Fancy meeting you here, mate!” The man named Sands called as he jumped from the small boat to help tug it ashore.

“Yes, it seems the winds are blowing in my favor,” Dominick grunted, but he was smirking, and his eyes seemed happy to see a familiar face.

“And what do you have here?” Sands asked, moving from the boat and bowing down with an outstretched arm. “I am Sands, who might your lovely maiden be? And–why are you with *Nick*?”

I turned to Dominick, but he was looking at me with questioning eyes. I moved even closer to him, unsure of what to say.

"Not a talker?" Sands asked.

"That's alright. I am sure that both of them have been through a great deal. We are traveling to the Misted Seas. You have safe passage with us if you desire it. It seems we do not need a magical sea creature after all to find hidden things out here," the man in the fancy blue coat said while walking up to us.

Dominick, Sands, and I all turned to look at him.

"Hello," I said, and although we were not touching, I could sense Dominick going rigid.

"I am Prince Peter of Walden. What are your names?"

I turned to look at Dominick who was glaring at Prince Peter of Walden.

Is this—his brother? I placed a hand on his arm.

"I am Meria," I said simply.

"Nice to meet you, and you are?" Prince Peter turned to Dominick.

"Nick."

"Nice to meet you, Nick. Do you and Sands know each other? You are, also, a fisherman who lost his way?"

"Yes, Sands and I often *fished* together," Dominick said, looking at Sands, who was nodding his head, smiling at Prince Peter.

"Well, glad to have you reunited. I found him floating in the sea over a week ago. He is a fighter, and it seems you two are fighters as well." Peter looked at me, up and down, possibly taking in my clothes.

My lack of clothing, when I first met Dominick, had startled him. Perhaps, wearing nothing other than Dominick's shirt was startling, for the Prince's eyes widened at me, then quickly turned away.

"I am a survivor, it's true," Sands said with a smirk,

"Are you the captain of this ship?" Dominick asked Prince Peter.

"No, but I am in charge of our mission."

"To the Misted Seas?" Dominick asked.

"Yes, and you are all welcome to join us. We are on a rescue mission of sorts."

"Yes, the Walden Prince is looking for his lady love who was stolen by pixies," Sands said with a smile.

"Not my 'lady love,' but, yes, my dearest friend was stolen by pixies, and I am searching for her. Everyone knows that pixies live beyond the Misted

Seas," Prince Peter said in correction.

"Indeed," Sands said, nodding at the Prince.

"This is Captain William. It is his first time commanding a ship, but he does a fair job of it," Prince Peter said when the third man left the small boat and walked over to where we conversed. He had a similar blue coat, while not as fine, and a rather large black hat. I wondered if all captains wore such hats.

What will it be like on a ship? I wondered. *Will I like it better than the island? Will I hate it? Will I be able to go into the ocean and swim?* There was no way I could go without the sea. As I was thinking those things over, there was a glint in my peripheral vision near Sands and Dominick. I turned to them and saw Dominick holding something in his hand, but I did not see what, as his hand was behind him.

"What an honor, Captain, that you would come personally for this rescue," Dominick said.

"Sands made a good point, that there might be fruit here. I am a lover of all fruit. We have all kinds of dried fruit on the ship. I feel as if even while sailing, why go without the finer things in life?" the captain said.

"Yes, he has many different fruits," Prince Peter said. "I am sure you are both going to enjoy the variety," he added with a smile. I nodded, and then in a split second, everything changed.

Prince Peter was on the ground, Sands standing over him with a dagger, and Dominick was standing over the captain with a longer blade at his throat.

"Now, listen here and listen well, we are taking over your ship," Dominick growled.

"Over my dead body you are!" Prince Peter called. "I mean, over William's dead body–as it is his command–William?" Peter questioned.

"Ah–right! Yes, over my dead body will you take command of my vessel–and my fruit!" He shifted stiffly under Dominick's knife as if trying to see Prince Peter. "I dare say, Peter, if they are left to care for things, it will all be spoiled."

"Not now. Stop it about your fruit, Will! There are knives at our throats."

"Yes, indeed. Well–what the Prince said," the captain finished.

"Over *our* dead bodies!" Prince Peter said again. Sands bent down lower and moved his blade to the side of Prince Peter's face.

"That could be arranged, Prince," Sands chuckled.

“I saved you!” Prince Peter shouted.

“Yes, you did, and I thank you for that. Thank you, also for *this*; we are in desperate need of a ship,” Sands said with a smile.

“You are pirates, aren’t you?” Peter gasped.

“Aye,” Sands answered with a grin.

I was standing there with no idea what to do. Obviously, it was wrong to steal those people's ship, especially when they were trying to help us. But Dominick, he did say he was a pirate, and I did say I was okay with that.

Is this not what pirates do?

What shall I do?

“Meria, grab some rope from the boat for me, will you?” Dominick called. I met his eyes. He looked pleading as if he needed me to trust him.

I do trust him, don't I? He had kept us safe and alive on the island. *I guess I listen to Dominick.* I nodded and walked over to the small boat and pulled out some rope, walking back up to the men.

“Thank you,” Dominick said to me as I tossed the rope at his feet. As I moved away, he began to address the captain: “You are welcome aboard *my* ship, or in the depths of the sea; it is *your* choice.”

“You will pay for this. Walden will see you all hang!” Captain William shouted, but I watched as he wrapped his arms through the rope at Dominick’s direction.

“Meria, can you finish tying this to make sure it is tight,” Dominick asked, still holding his sword to the captain’s neck.

I walked over, trembling. *Dominick is kind. This has to be an act.* I would play along and feel out how things progressed.

“You do not have to help him–” the captain began, turning to address me fully.

“Do not speak to her!” Dominick shouted, his sword drawing blood from the captain’s neck. “Do not speak to her or even look at her; she is mine,” he bellowed.

My heart swelled.

She is mine.

“Okay, okay!” the captain said.

Once the rope was tied tight, Dominick dropped his sword and motioned for the captain to enter the boat. He walked over to Sands, and together, they helped get Prince Peter tied up and into the boat.

“The crew will never do as you say,” the captain spat.

“You think they will still follow *you* after you let their ship be taken over by pirates, one of them being The Cruel Hand?” Sands said with a laugh.

“You–you are The Cruel Hand?” Prince Peter gulped, looking from Sands to Dominick.

“Aye, a pleasure. Now, do sit down and shut up. I’d rather not touch anyone if I don’t have to; I have no gloves,” Dominick said and turned to me, and in a different tone, much kinder, asked, “You ready?”

Am I ready? I wondered.

“Domi–”

He looked at me; he did not want me to call him that.

“*Nick*, are you sure this is the best idea?”

“All will be well, Meria. As long as they do as I say, they will not be permanently damaged,” he shrugged.

“Only their minds,” Sands said with a laugh and climbed into the boat.

Dominick gave me a sweet smile and helped me into the rocking boat, not letting his skin touch mine. It was a small boat, but we all fit, and soon, we were heading to the large ship.

I had no idea what was going to happen aboard–no idea if we would be killed the moment we stepped onto the deck because we had captured their captain and prince.

“Do not worry, Meria. Nothing will happen to you, I promise,” Dominick said as I sat and shivered, but not at all from the cool sea breeze and salty spray.

“Thank you,” was all I could say because Dominick and I had a deal. I would help him cross those waters and find his sister; then he would help me travel to Walden and find my mother. I paused, looking at Dominick, then Prince Peter.

Peter was his brother. Dominick had to realize that. “Is he?”

He nodded.

Perhaps, if things don't work out with Dominick, I can help Prince Peter and have him help me find my mother in Walden.

While I did not wish to betray Dominick, I did not know fully what pirates did. That first act as a pirate was not promising.

I had two options there–two ways to go about it, and I was not sure what I would do. I wanted to be on Dominick’s side, but what if Dominick, the human I had come to care for, was on the wrong side?

May the Ancients help me.

I could not help but feel like who he was on the island was more who he was meant to be–and that pirate persona, The Cruel Hand, was not who he really was. He'd held my hand just that morning, and there was nothing cruel about it. Was it possible that his pirate side was what he was forced to be, not who he wanted to be?

I had been obedient in order to survive, living under my father's rule. Had Dominick lived as a pirate to survive, too? Was it possible we were more alike than I ever would have believed? Dominick was good, I just knew it, even if he did questionable things. I needed to learn more.

Perhaps, I could inform Peter that Dominick was his brother if things got bad. *What would he say to that?*

I wished Finn was there. *What would he do?*

I would do nothing until I was sure.

Chapter Twenty

Dominick

It was captivating watching her, watching the colors flash in her eyes from the stern of the ship. She was taking everything in for the first time, and it was truly wonderful to just imagine what she was thinking. I loved the sea; it was no surprise just how much I loved it. I loved the cool crisp air, the way that if you stood at the bow of the ship, it felt as if you were flying, or what I assumed flying would be like.

"You had a better time than I, it seemed after the ship sank," Sands said, coming up behind me.

"Being shipwrecked is only slightly better than being pulled from the sea and rescued. I was on that Island for quite a while."

"Two weeks. What is two weeks, with her?" Sands said, motioning to Meria.

"Stop–"

"She is pretty. Not my type, exactly. I like my women with legs that do not *change*," he said with a wink.

After we took over the ship, I told Sands everything, including that Meria was a mermaid. She and I had discussed it and decided that Sands being in on the secret would be helpful.

“Sands, if someone hears you–”

“What? Do I like a good pair of legs? Yes, I do! ” He said with a smirk.

“I will make you walk the plank,” I grunted. “I do not want you talking about her in that way.”

“I am saying I do not like *her* legs–”

“Which is madness, as her legs are incredibly beautiful, as is her tail. So, either silence on the topic, or I swear to the Creator, I *will* make you walk.”

“Wow, you care about her.”

“I do not. I am in charge of her protection. There is a difference. I do not need you giving anyone ideas. She is the only maiden on board, and I do not want her spoken about in such a way. She is more than her appearance; she is kind and generous.”

“Wow–” Sands said with a wide grin. “You *really* like her.”

“She is my friend.”

He laughed, “Sure, she is your *friend,* and I am a squid.”

I shoved his shoulder.

“Just walk up to her, kiss her, and be done with it.”

“I am not going to kiss her, just as I would never kiss you. We are friends, too.”

“Hey–give me a little peck on the cheek, here, and see if she gets jealous,” Sands said with a chuckle, pointing to his cheek. I shoved him again, and his laughter drew eyes toward us.

“Do shut up, man,” I said in a tone I wanted him to know was serious.

“Okay, okay, but you really should give her a kiss.”

“Not going to happen. Drop it.”

“You lean in for the kiss, maybe place your hands around her waist–pulling her into your arms is the best. If the maiden meets you halfway when you tilt your head down, well, that is your *yes*. Lean in the rest of the way, and make her dreams come true,” Sands said, wiggling his eyebrows. “I enjoy making maidens' dreams come true. It is rather rewarding.”

“I am sure that is *no one’s* dream.”

“I can see it in their eyes. Maidens like a good kiss. I’m sure she desires a kiss from you—her rescuer,” Sands said, batting his eyes at me like a fool.

“You look like a fool.”

“Not as much as you do, mooning over your maiden.”

“This is not something I desire to speak about."

“I am just saying, she seems to like you, too. I am sure your kiss would be welcomed. I am not sure how recently you have had a kiss, and by the straightness of your back, I would say you need a maiden’s kiss to melt you a bit."

“Melt me? Have you been drinking rum?”

“No—I had a few sips. It is not very good. But Aye, Captain, melt!” Sands said, swatting a hand on my back. “I kissed a princess once. I will not go into details; it was before you and I met, but let me just say, I have never had such a kiss before. I thought I might actually collapse. Luckily for her, I am strong and handled myself well. I could tell she wanted me, but I have to leave them wanting more, you know.”

“Where is she now?”

“Her kingdom. I stole the kiss and was off. Maidens like a rogue, a mystery,” he said as I looked at him, his face turned to the wind, his eyes focused.

Did he care about that princess? What princess was it? I was curious, but I did not want to feed into that conversation. It was rather uncomfortable to speak about women and feelings and such. All feelings were, were pain, and I had enough pain every second of my life.

Until you touched Meria. I shoved that thought away.

“Did you check on the Prince?” I asked, needing to change the subject.

“Yes, we gave them some food. Have you tried the dried fruit? I will tell you, Captain William was onto something. This dried fruit is a far cry better than anything on the Crimson Blade.”

I turned around and hushed Sands.

“We don’t need people knowing where we came from.”

“Sorry, but it is true,” he shrugged. Before I could punch his arm for a third time, he jogged away with a salute.

I was drawn back to Meria, only she was no longer where I had last seen her. It felt like a rock slammed against my chest as I quickly glanced around, looking for her. As my eyes darted about the deck, searching for her, I made my way down under the deck, passing a number of Prince Peter’s former crew members. When we took over the ship, the Prince went willingly, asking his crew not to fight us.

When I first saw Peter with his brown hair the same color as mine, only curly; his blue eyes; and even my same bone structure, even before he said his name, I knew who he was. He was my brother. Peter looked like me, even as a child, but it seemed that he had taken after me even more as he grew up. And in reality, we both took after our father. How could our mother be with him, see him everyday, and not want to be rid of him, along with the reminder that he was the image of her husband whom she had lost?

Most likely because *Peter* had not killed her husband–*I* had.

Meria

I wanted to speak with Prince Peter. I felt like I needed to, although I had no idea what to say. I made my way from the back of the ship, taking one last look at Dominick, who was talking to Sands. I worried over the silent crew and wanted to do or say something. But what could I say? What could I do to assure them that Dominick would not hurt them? He just needed a ship, and that was the only way he knew to go about it.

Maybe Prince Peter would understand if I explained it to him. I couldn't help but wonder if that would be betraying Dominick? It was difficult to decide what to do. Having someone choose what I did was much easier in so many ways. My father would know exactly what to do—*no*. No, I had to make the choice for myself. Even if I made a mistake, I would follow my heart, my soul's melody.

Once below the deck of the ship, I made my way to the prison cells. Peter was slumped against the bars, and the captain was beside him in a separate cell.

"Your Highness?" I whispered, walking up to him.

"Oh, Marie–Maria?" he said, turning around. His eyes met with mine, and he smiled.

"Hello, It's Mer-i-a, actually, but that's fine. I wanted to speak with you."

"Do not speak to her, Prince. I am sure she will poison your mind," Captain William spat.

I flinched and stepped back.

"Nonsense. Come and speak with me, Mer-ia," Peter said with a warm smile.

"I am sorry that you are down here. This is *not* what I wanted."

"It is not your fault. What has The Cruel Hand done to you?" He paused. "When we are free, you are welcome to come along with us."

“Oh, he has not hurt me. He is kind.”

“Kind! Ha! She is being manipulated by him. A snake in the water, one that will destroy all that I have worked for,” Captain William interrupted.

“Silence, William, or you will be stripped of your title.”

“I care not for my title.”

“Your fruit stores back home, then.”

“You would not touch them!” he shouted, clutching the bars of his cell.

“I would if you do not let me speak with this kind maiden.”

“Yes, sorry, Prince,” he said, closing his mouth and leaning back, away from the bars.

“Perhaps, I should not have come down here,” I began, taking a few backward steps.

“Sorry about William; he gets a bit testy when his crew and ship is taken from him by two pirates who he was trying to save. He also is worried about his fruit stores–you do understand,” Peter said with a smile.

“Yes, well—”

“Listen, Meria, all I desire is to find my friend. I am afraid she is not doing well. I am searching for her.”

“We are headed to the Misted Seas. Perhaps, we could drop you off.”

“How would I ever return?” he asked.

“Oh—I’m not sure.”

“I have to take my ship back. Can you help me with that?”

“I don’t know—”

Dominick

I made my way into the small, dirty dungeon under the ship’s deck, surprised to see Meria, kneeling down and speaking in whispers to Peter.

“Meria?” I called from the end of the room and quickly made my way to her. She stood up and faced me.

“Dominick?” she asked as I approached. As I looked at her, the worry I had about her being in danger faded as I saw that she was unharmed. But then I turned to a gasping Peter, whose blue eyes were wide, and staring at me.

“*Dom-in-ick?* Is th-a-at you-your *real* name?” Peter asked in astonishment, the words jumbled together.

“I am The Cruel Hand,” I said to him, then turned to Meria. I ached to put my arms around her and take her from that place, and from the horrible conditions found below the deck of a ship. I had found new gloves aboard

the ship, so I didn't have to worry about hurting Meria. Peter spoke, taking me aback.

“Dom? Is it really you?” he merely whispered, and it was like he was a small child again.

The little boy I had known, he always called me, “Dom.” I dropped my shoulders. I had loved my little brother. I had only a few memories of Peter, but they were fond ones. I wanted nothing but the best for him, and *I* was not what was best for him. It was best he forgot about his brother. I would keep them in the dungeons till our mission was over, and until I was in Walden with my sister and could see my revenge play out on my mother’s face.

“I have not been called that–” I whispered, too ashamed of my feelings to look Meria, or Peter, in their eyes. “–In a long time.”

“*You* are The Cruel Hand? All this time, it has been you? How? You travel and visit the kingdoms and events all around Terra, yet you are also a *pirate*? Mother *lives* for those notes from the royals, telling her how they enjoyed your visits. She wants to hear anything and everything about you that she can.” Then he became more irritated. “Sneaking away in the middle of the night–leaving us behind,” Peter spat, standing, clutching the bars. “And now, here you are–taking over a Walden ship, and throwing your brother into a prison cell.”

“Mother wants to ‘hear anything about *me’*? You are mad!” I bellowed at him from the other side of the bars. I slammed my hand against them, and he stepped back, his eyes fearful.

“She has always hoped you would, someday, return home.”

“She doesn't want me home. Stop trying to lie to me, trying to play games, just to get yourself out of here.”

“I am not lying. You left, and mother–”

“I do not want to hear about *your* mother.”

“She is your mother, too!” he shouted.

“No–my mother did not want me. She sent me off, and that made me who I am. My *mother* is not the same mother you know. She is not mine. I have not had a mother for a very long time,” I said and felt Meria's small hand upon my arm. I turned to look at her light blue eyes.

“Dominick, are you well?” she whispered.

“As lovely as this chat has been,” I said, turning from Meria to Peter, “We have plans.” I took Meria’s hand in mine and nearly tugged her from the

dungeon. Once we were on deck, I breathed in a fresh breath of salty air and let go of Meria's hand.

"I am so sorry."

"It would have come out, eventually. It is fine, Meria. How are you?" I said, using my free hand to brush my hair out of my face.

"I am fine, but do you not want to talk about what just happened? Your brother—you haven't seen him in so long, and so much was said."

"I have no use for talking about feelings, Meria," I grunted.

"Really?" she asked, crossing her arms and putting her nose in the air. Her long white-pink curls draped around her, a mess again, and in grave need of a comb. She was such a beauty–so enchanting to look at. I had a hard time focusing.

"Really. Now, let me show you where you will be staying." I motioned for her to follow me, and she did. We walked to the captain's quarters, which I thought about giving to her, but that might not have given the right impression to the crew, if the only maiden on board had the captain's quarters. She could, then, be used as a bargaining chip against me. I did not need any harm coming to her.

"You are stubborn," she mumbled as we walked. When I reached the small door to the right of the captain's quarters, I opened it for her. I was sure that was where the Prince had been staying, as it was quite fine in design and dressings.

"I am not sure what all is here, but make yourself at home."

"We need more water to make myself 'at home,'" Meria said with a laugh.

"Did you just jest, Meria?" I said with a crooked smile. I enjoyed the humor, which pulled me away from the emotions my brother had stirred up.

"I think, I did–" she said, covering her mouth with her hand.

I walked over and gently moved her hand from her mouth. I do not know what came over me, but I took longer than I should have to let her hand go. I drew a circle with my thumb on her wrist, then slowly let go of her hand, then her fingers, till they slipped from my gloved grasp.

"I liked that jest, keep it up. We may have you voicing all the things you have locked up in that head of yours, soon."

"Unlikely–it seems I am only comfortable with you."

"Well, we can remedy that. You have to speak your mind, Meria, or else everyone, for your entire life, will *use* you."

“Like your old captain used your curse?” she asked. I saw fear flicker in her eyes for a second. But it was true. I let Veeto control me for way too long.

“Yes, Meria, and I want better for you than what I have had.” I stepped back and walked to the door.

“Dominick–” she said. I turned around and tried not to notice all the beauty that emanated from her as she stood before me. I wondered for a second what it would be like to kiss Meria, her pretty, pink, soft lips–and running my hands through those beautiful white-pink, messy curls as I did so– “Do you think there is a chance that he lied to you?”

“Veeto? Yes, he lied all the time,” I said, confused at the question.

“I mean–” She walked closer, and I held my breath as her hand caressed my chest. “Is it possible that your mother, actually, never sent you away?”

“That is *not* possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because–you do not know the things you are speaking about,” I said, taking another step back.

“I am sorry–I just–”

“It’s fine. I have to go. Have a good evening. I am next door if you need something. I hope the swaying of the ship on the sea will help you sleep.” I bowed my head and escaped through the door.

My mind was reeling. I walked the deck once, then went back into my cabin, where there were plenty of books and maps of the Misted Seas. However, I tried, and failed in my attempt to read them.

Meria and Peter could not be correct. My mother did not want me. She hated me, cursed my existence, and gave me over to Veeto. If she was anything other than that, it would have crumbled everything I thought I knew–all I thought I was–and my mission.

But they were misinformed; my mother did not want me.

But I would make her see who I had become and make her regret forcing me to go with Veeto.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dominick

I walked across the deck, over to the wheel. Whenever I passed any of the men from Walden, they always looked down at their feet, silently completing whatever task they had been given. If they only knew that I did not enjoy the circumstances, either, but that it was my only option, maybe they would not have been so fearful.

A tall man with light brown hair stood, untangling nets near the helm. I would have thought nothing of it, but the man quickly became the next person I wanted to force to walk the plank. He was not alone. He was standing behind *her*, his arms around Meria as he showed her how to tie the nets, or, at least, I was certain that was what he was using as a ruse to get close to her. I watched in anger as he caressed her hand while moving the net. Meria, of course, was none-the-wiser, smiling and nodding. By the look in his eye, I knew he was up to something.

"Get away from her!" I shouted as I reached them. The man pulled away from Meria instantly and stood at attention, facing me.

“Captain,” he said with his hand held against his brow. He was very formal, and I appreciated that at the moment. He was obviously a trained navy man.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“George, Captain.”

“George, You must have better things to do than this. Last I knew, *she* was not a crew member.”

“Captain, I was teaching–”

“Did I ask? Go do something before I throw you over and let the fathoms take you!” I bellowed.

“She asked, Captain,”

“Or better yet–” I took off one of my gloves and held my hand out in front of his face. “I have never touched a man’s face before. I wonder what kind of pain *that* would create.”

“Please–please–” the man began to beg.

What a coward. I had seen all different kinds of reactions to my threats. That was one of the weaknesses I saw far too often. There were only a few men who looked pain in the face and took it on. Even though I did not know their names, those few had earned my respect.

“Dominick,” I heard a faint, melodic voice, but I was glaring at George, knowing he needed to pay. I did not take lightly to him trying to manipulate Meria. “Dominick, I am alright.” I turned from George to Meria. It was her voice, of course.

“Go on, now–” Meria said, looking behind me. I heard shuffling feet, but did not turn around to face the man.

“Meria–” I said.

She walked to me, took my glove, and carefully put it on my hand.

“Come–” she said.

In a sort of confused daze, I followed her, and when she closed the door of my cabin, that was when I realized I had let my anger cause me to overreact with George. She had seen me be The Cruel Hand almost fully.

“That was unnecessary.”

“I would not expect you to understand,” I grunted.

“Try me,” she said softly.

I turned around, and I focused on her face, trying not to let my heart take control. But her face was beautiful, and it was not any easier to look into

those beautiful, blue eyes–bright as the sky on a clear day–a clear day after days and days of stormy weather.

I walked up to her. She wanted to know what it was like to be a human? Well, I would teach her, I decided.

"Not everyone has your best interests at heart," I told her.

"George is a kind–" she began.

"Maybe, but maybe not. I do not know him. Neither do you."

"But surely, the people the royals of Walden choose to crew their ships are good people."

"Maybe most are, but it is better to be careful. If a man wraps his arms around you, it is not just to help you untie nets. There is no reason when tying nets to hold someone like that. I was taught how to do it, and I never had anyone put their arms around me so."

"Truly?" she asked, and from her expression, I could tell that she did not understand.

That maiden–if left alone, the world would tear her up. I had seen and felt so much sorrow and pain because of my curse, and much of the pain I had felt when touching people had been, originally, inflicted upon them by others. I did not want her to have that kind of pain, or any pain. I did not want men to use her for their benefit.

How do I put this so she understands?

We spoke the same language, but there was a cultural barrier between us. She did not understand many simple human things. An idea popped into my mind, and I spoke.

"Yes, he wished to kiss you."

"*Kiss* me!?" she said with a gasp.

"As I said, human men desire such things from maidens without any promises of betrothal," I clarified. "Now, I must go steer the ship." I turned without a word and walked to the door, making my way to the wheel.

"That is a bit dramatic, do you not think?" she asked from behind me in her quiet yet forceful way.

"Why are you following me?" I groaned.

"I did not think the conversation was finished," she said as I turned to face her.

She took a step back and dipped her head down. She was incredibly submissive, and I hated that.

"Don't do that."

“Do what?” she whispered. I walked over to her and lifted her chin, looking directly into her eyes, holding her firm. Even though my gloves were between us, I felt a warmth travel through me at the contact. She was so alluring–addicting. I had to be careful.

“Do not look down like that–as if your thoughts and opinions are second to mine. They are not. And do not dare apologize to me right now, Meria.”

“I—” She paused, confused. “What?"

“What you want to discuss is valid, even if I act like an impatient fool.”

“But you walked away. Perhaps, I shall try again later.”

“You followed me, so you wanted to keep talking. Keep talking,” I said with a wink. “Which means, this is important to you. I’d like to listen, even if I don’t agree, and even if we argue.”

“Yes, well, maybe I shouldn't have. I don’t like arguing.”

“No, you should have. Arguing is not a bad thing. Do not just do what I say because I say it. I am not someone you have to please, Meria. I just want you to be aware of how things work up here, and how human men behave. Do as you desire with the information I have given you.”

“So, I should go help George again with the nets and let him kiss me?” she asked.

“The real question is *would you like George to kiss you*? If that is a ‘yes,’ then go ahead. If it is a ‘no’–as I suspect–now, you know what to do so men aboard this ship have no reason to believe that you want their attention in that way.”

“I see, well–” she said, biting her lip. It took too much effort to move my gaze from her pink lips to the sea behind her, but I did it. I always did what needed to be done. She was taking too long to answer. I glanced down at her, and she had a ridiculous smile on her face–her eyes bright as if she knew something I did not know. I wanted to know what she knew. Wanted to know what made her smile like that. I wanted to move my thumb and touch that smile. I held myself back. Why was she smiling?

Was it the thought of her kissing George?

I hate George. I am going to have to kill him, and I really am not in the mood to torture anyone.

“Would you like George to kiss you?” I growled, impatiently searching her eyes as if they could break me or save me.

“No, not particularly,” she finally answered, in an attempt not to laugh.

I gulped, looking at her lips as she licked them; then she bit her bottom lip.

I cannot have this conversation.

“I am sure he would love to hear such a lovely sentiment from you on the matter. Perhaps, you should tell him how much you would dislike his kisses.”

“Perhaps, I shall. Thank you, Dominick,” she said with her beautiful smile, then a small laugh. I had no idea why it was so humorous to her.

“Just be careful; not all these men have good intentions, alright?”

“I do not know if I am supposed to do as you say or not. You are confusing to me. Just tell me what you want me to do, Dominick. Please, I need guidance. I am doing everything wrong.”

That maiden's lack of trust in herself and in her intuition and in her desires and feelings made me sick. I had always done as Veeto asked, but I still knew myself. I knew what I would do differently if I could have what I really wanted. Did she? I placed my other hand on her cheek, moving both of my hands so that I held her face in my grasp.

“I am not going to tell you what to do. I believe you desperately need to make your own choices, even if I don’t agree—even if you make mistakes, Meria.”

“That is—terrifying, Dominick,” she whispered, and I didn’t realize it until I looked at her, that she had moved so close to me. She reached out and began making those circles with her finger on my chest like she had inside the cave when we had slept beside each other each night. I was coming undone by that beautiful mermaid. Any pain I normally felt disappeared when she touched me.

“You are brave enough, Meria—strong enough to do it. And when you make a choice, I’ll be here to support it. I’ll be here when you make mistakes and as you learn to trust yourself.”

“Why? Why would you do that?” she gasped. I looked down into her eyes, which captured me fully.

“Because—” I paused.

“Yes?”

“Because you are *my* mermaid,” I whispered back.

We looked at each other for a long while; it felt like an eternity, but suddenly, she was nodding her head. I stepped back, releasing my hold on

her, and breaking the connection of her hand on my chest. As much as I hated to do it, it was necessary.

"So, as for George, I think he is kind, and you are overreacting. But I understand; I should be careful of humans. Is that right?"

"Does it feel right?" I asked.

She looked at me. I watched her gaze as it fell to my scar. I wondered what she thought of it.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good," I nodded and turned back around. I was going to be in trouble with her aboard that ship. She had saved my life, so I owed her. Although I did wonder if saving me like she had was the right thing for her to have done. There were a few moments as I was losing air and drowning when I thought it might have been a good idea to no longer exist–to be free of the world, as I was someone so full of evil that it even manifested through my veins.

But I also could not help but be grateful that I had met Meria.

I walked back to steer the ship.

As I placed my hands on the polished brown wheel, I took a deep breath. I needed to focus. I had a strange, new sea to explore.

"I am going to talk with Peter," she said from behind me.

She had followed me. I wanted to groan; I did not know how much longer I could speak with her without doing something I would regret. I gripped the wheel even tighter.

"I do not advise that," I said, wondering what she would say. Would she cave in to what I thought or do as she desired?

"Okay," she said, and I looked at her as she stood beside me, her tangled hair lifted up by the salty wind. She looked at the deck for a few moments before she lifted her head and looked at me with a beautifully defiant look. She took in a shaky breath. "I heard you, but I still wish to finish speaking with him. I don't think he needs to be imprisoned. We can all work together." She paused as if waiting for me, but I waited to make sure she was done speaking.

"Ah, that would be a wonderful thing if the world worked that way."

"What do you mean?"

"People are not kind and good like you, Meria; they want power."

"But he is your brother. I am sure some agreement could be made to help both parties. I am sure he wishes to find his sister, too—you are similar. He

is looking for his friend."

"We are only similar in appearance. I assure you, he is an honest, virtuous prince. Unlike me, he is a *true* gentleman."

"But you said you were—"

"I said I would *act* like a gentleman; I can act very well," I winked.

"Like you act when you're The Cruel Hand?"

"What?" I said a little rougher than I would have liked. But the question took me by surprise.

"That is not *you,* Dominick; it was who you were forced to be."

I was silent, not knowing what to say to that. She did not know me, nor the darkness inside of me.

"So I am going to talk with Peter." She did not seem sure about it, so I turned my head to the side.

"Are you?" I asked.

"Yes, I am quite sure I will. You cannot make me not see him." She stood taller, her shoulders back.

"Good," I said, turning to look at the wheel.

"Good," she said, moving closer, so that our arms brushed, and I felt no pain at all. It was a startling and incredible feeling, but I didn't know if I should like it—so I moved away a few inches.

"Good," I repeated again with a nod and a smirk.

"Good, so if you are okay with it."

"Ah–you were *so* close!" I said with a chuckle. "Go; do what you want, just be careful," I said with an intense look, gazing down at her furrowed brow.

"Thank you," she whispered, and before I knew what was happening, her hand was on my shoulder, and her lips were pressed onto the side of my cheek where my scar was. I turned to look at her, my mouth hanging open in shock, but she was running across the deck.

That little—I touched my cheek where she'd just kissed me, baffled, yet I knew I had to have been smiling like a fool.

"Yes, it's so obvious you do not like her. I see the way you despise her," Sands said, coming out of nowhere.

"Shut it," I snapped, dropping my hand from my cheek. "I never realized how irritating you are."

"Aw, you adore me. I was just reminding you; she's your *friend*."

"And you are a spineless jellyfish. Go find something to steal."

“Already did, Anything worth stealing has been stolen,” Sands said.

“Anything good?”

“Plenty of gold.”

“That’s good,” I said with a nod, hoping Sands would drop any conversation about Meria. I needed some time because I was feeling a bit strange after she kissed the scar on my cheek.

“So–” Sands began, but I cut him off.

“I wish I had my maps, but the captain did have a map of the Misted Seas, so if I have this right, we will reach the Misted Seas tomorrow.”

“Change of subject, nice,” Sands said with a laugh so annoying that I pulled out my sword to keep him from coming any closer to me. He only laughed harder, bending over to slap his knee. “I have never seen such a reaction from you before!” Then, peals of laughter.

“Why is this so funny?”

“The *Cruel Hand*–does not have a *cruel heart*,” Sands said, and before I could strike him down, he ran away to the lower deck.

I sighed. I needed to be alone–nothing but the wind and sea and with the wheel in my hands.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Meria

The sea was almost a different creature entirely when aboard the ship. The ship seemed to glide across the water as effortlessly as any sea creature. The breeze was salty, and it reminded me so much of my home. I wanted so badly to dive beneath the surface and fill my lungs with the salty water I missed. I ached everywhere, and I knew that I needed to go into the water soon.

I was sleeping in a room that was near the captain's quarters. It was a beautiful room with lush, rich, blue fabrics and beautiful, carved details on every surface. I wondered what Dominick's room was like. I enjoyed sleeping on the ship better than I did in the cave because on the ship, there was constant movement, but I missed Dominick. It was a strange thing, perhaps, but I had become comfortable sleeping beside him. I even missed comforting him in the night when he had nightmares.

Does he still have those nightmares?

I reflected on the last night we had spent on Marren Island. He had let me sleep pressed up against him, and he had rocked me to sleep.

How can that Dominick from Marren Island also be The Cruel Hand?

It did not make sense to me. *That* Dominick would not have stolen a ship and placed his brother in the dungeons. He did express that he would have to play the part–pretend to be a pirate.

Is this that? It has to be.

After speaking with Peter a handful of times, I realized that he was a very kind human. I wanted him freed.

Peter was angry at first to be held prisoner, but he had decided to wait his brother out.

I moved from the bed and walked to the door, pausing for a moment, touching the wooden frame. I wondered if it was wise to leave my room during the late evening hours?

Everyone will be asleep, I argued with myself.

It was the middle of the night; I would be safe, alone. I opened the door and pressed it closed softly, looking back and forth for any movement. No one was near. I walked past Dominick's door, seeing a light coming from beneath it.

Does he still have trouble sleeping, here, on the ship? I wondered. I wanted to go in there and speak with him–but *Why?*

What do I have to converse with him about?

Nothing. I realized that I just wanted to be with him. That was interesting. The only person I had ever truly enjoyed being with was Finn; Was I adding Dominick to that very short list? I shook my head and walked past his door, determined that some fresh, salty air would help me.

"Hey there, maiden, need a night stroll?" I turned to see a man I had not yet met behind me as I stood in a hallway, which led out to the deck.

"I just needed to stretch my legs."

"Me, too. Can I join you?"

I looked at the man who was wearing a coat and shoes. He seemed kind with his wide smile. His brown, curly hair made his sharper features more endearing, somehow. I did not want company, and I decided that I did not like that strange smile on his lips as he waited for my response. Even though I did not want it, I found myself agreeing. I had always had guards following me around in Marren. I was used to silent company, and I suppose that's what I thought that sailor would be. I would keep a distance, and be clear that it was nothing other than a walk.

Dominick didn't need to know that I was falling into my old habits of being agreeable.

"Sure," I said. He came to stand beside me as we walked to the deck. Even at night, there were a few others on deck, keeping a watchful eye on the ocean and the ship.

"Have you ever been on a ship before?" the man asked.

"No."

"How do you like it so far?"

"It's nice."

"I am Richard, by the way."

"Meria," I said as we reached the side of the ship. I closed my eyes and let the salty breeze give me some sense of the sea. I wanted to connect with the ocean so badly.

"Everyone knows *you*. Beautiful name. I will say it matches the maiden."

I looked up at him.

He smiled wide. He seemed so kind, but I became uncomfortable.

Leave. He is not kind.

Why?

Why was I uncomfortable? I remembered what Dominick had warned me about men aboard the ship. But I had not let him near me. We only spoke a little.

"Thank you," I smiled politely with a nod as I would to one of the Marren mermen under the sea.

Before I knew what was happening, he was too close, his lips grazing the side of my face. I stepped back and pushed him away with repulsion. There was a loud cry–a woosh of air, and Richard was no longer beside me, but he was in the sea below. I looked around to see Dominick standing beside me, instead, aglow in the moonlight, his bare chest rising and falling, his hair wild around his face and blowing in the wind. His eyes were fixed solely on me. His look was stern.

"What are you doing? Did you not hear what I said earlier today?" he nearly shouted.

Snapping out of the shock of Dominick flinging Richard into the sea, I looked around the ship. "Someone needs to help him!" I gasped, looking from Dominick to Richard, struggling in the water below.

"I do not care about that fool, Meria!" Dominick growled, coming closer as I looked over the railing of the ship. I turned around to look at him. He

stepped closer to me, only a few steps away. “Did you not hear what I said earlier today about these men?” He was seething, I could see the anger in his eyes–hear it in his tone.

“Richard seemed kind. How was I to know otherwise?”

Your soul said otherwise. I really needed to start trusting myself.

“Listen.” He held up his gloved hands and placed them on my shoulders. Unlike Richard’s touch, I welcomed Dominick’s and moved closer to him, my soul aching for the connection. “Meria, men on ships, even royal ships, often spend months at sea. They do not often see any maidens for long periods of time, and men *like* maidens. I’m not saying this is an excuse to behave poorly, but men can be vile–especially when they have not been around maidens for a long time.”

“You are *not* vile.”

“Listen, please,” he nearly begged. His thumbs made circular movements on my shoulders. It was a soothing motion that had become a habit between the both of us–so soothing, yet making my body buzz with the desire to wrap my arms around him.

“I’m listening,” I whispered.

“Men miss women and their *company*. Is it not like this under the sea with the males?”

“Of course, mermen love mermaids, and there are mermen who overstep and cross lines, but that has never happened to *me*.”

“It is possible that you were never taught how to deter unwanted attention away from you. I am sure you were guarded as the youngest princess?”

“I did often have guards around. But we were only walking. I had no idea–”

“Meria, you don’t have guards here. I am only one man, and I cannot keep an eye on you the entire time you are aboard this ship. You have to understand the dangers and learn how to deal with these men.”

“Okay.”

“When you give them your attention, they see that as a sign that you *like* them as more than friends.”

“Really?”

“Yes, on a ship, it is a little different than on land; however, you should still keep what I say in mind on land or at sea.”

“Okay, I am sorry. I am not trying to be any trouble.”

“Meria–you do not have to say ‘sorry,’ and you are not ‘trouble.’ You are a very *attractive* maiden,” he said, his hands still on my shoulders, and more than anything, I wanted to embrace him–feel his warmth and comfort like I had on Marren Island.

“I am?” I whispered.

“Yes, and men will continue to seek out your attention if you do not stand your ground and let them know you are not interested.”

“I was only being friendly.”

“I know that, but unfortunately, these men will take any kindness you give them and use it for their benefit. None of this is your fault, Meria. You have not done anything wrong,” he said. “But if you make it clear, they will know you are not interested.”

I heard a cry from Richard and turned to look out toward him. I could no longer see him. Dominick removed his hands from my shoulders and began combing fingers through his hair.

“You will not really leave him, will you?”

“I would, if you would not despise me for it,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. I took a few steps back to look over the railing and into the dark sea. He placed a hand on my back. “Be careful or you will fall in, too.”

“He did not ‘fall in’; you pushed him,” I said, turning my head to meet his gaze.

“Yes, I pushed him. He deserved more.”

“Dominick! Pull him up!” I demanded, moving closer to him and touching his chest. He looked down at my hands pressed against him. He covered them with one of his own and looked up to meet my eyes.

“Is that what you want, my mermaid? You want me to save him?” His eyes were so intent on me.

“I do not want him to die because he tried to *kiss* me. That is a bit extreme.”

“He should die,” he growled, clutching my hands tighter to him. “It would send the correct message aboard this ship, where you are concerned.”

“Dominick!” I begged.

He sighed and stepped away from me, but he held one of my hands in his, still. The thrill that he had not wanted to break that connection coursed through me. “You, there!” Dominick called to a man at our left. “Man overboard! Give that sailor a rope,” he said, and the man nodded, hurrying to grab a rope and toss it over. Two other men began pulling Richard up.

“You cannot toss men overboard. It was just a kiss–"

“‘Just a kiss’?” Dominick looked baffled, turning to face me directly.

"What? A kiss is nothing special, Dominick,” I said with a shrug.

“You should stop calling me that.” He closed his eyes for a moment as if irritated.

“You told me your name was Dominick on Marren.”

“Here, I am Captain Nick.”

“I miss Dominick,” I said as I reached out, touching his scar. I had dared to kiss it–and if the feeling of kissing his skin, just there, was any indication of it, I imagined a kiss from Dominick on my lips would be just as my sisters had described it–or even better.

“Meria, you should not touch me,” he sighed, but I did not remove my hand from his cheek.

“You won’t hurt me,” I whispered. He closed his eyes. I heard movement behind me, and I pulled away, to watch a sailor help Richard back over the rail. “*Dominick* would *not* have thrown that man overboard,” I said.

“Seeing as he is *me*, *yes*, he would have. And the Dominick you met on the island is not here. He cannot be here if I am still to be captain. As well as you–” he paused, and I turned to look at him. He was standing close to me. “You must become someone else here, Meria, too. It is what being at sea demands. Who you were will no longer do.”

“How can I change who I am?”

“Not truly who you are–only who you choose to show the men. I am not asking you to change *who you are*, but you must be more careful. You must be more cautious, and you must realize that you are a mermaid among humans. We are different. You were a princess, and no one dared touch you. Here, you are like the last fish available to a hoard of a hundred hungry men."

“I did not know he was going to kiss me.”

“What did he say right before he leaned in?”

“He told me I had a pretty name.”

“There you go. A man only compliments a maiden when he wants something from her.”

“Truly?” I asked him. “You just called me beautiful, moments ago, and yet, you did not try to kiss me.”

“No, but I do want something from you, Meria.”

“What?”

“For you to understand that you must be more observant and careful.”

“Oh–” I said.

Does he truly think I am beautiful? Or was he just being objective?

Why did I wish he had been the one leaning in, telling me my name was pretty? I never wanted that with Edmar.

“Think of it like this–” he said, leaning in closer, whispering the words.

His body was so close to mine that I could feel the heat, and I longed to be back inside the cave, wrapped up in his arms. That had been beyond wonderful.

“You are in shark infested waters, and you have a wound that is bleeding out, drawing them to you. Now, in this situation, would you let a shark wrap his fins around you? Would you go for a swim alone in the dark? Unchaperoned?”

“No.”

“Then do not do it here.”

“If this is how humans are–”

“No, it is not how *all* humans are,” I interrupted, but it is not a common thing for a maiden as lovely as you are to be aboard a ship. Like I said, many men here miss their sweethearts, their wives, even their mothers and sisters. There is something that women bring to the world that men can never emulate, no matter how hard we may try. Nothing's the same as a woman's smile, touch, laugh, and sweetness. Nothing can replace the love and attention of a woman.”

“I see–”

“Like I said, they are not horrible people, but do not put yourself in these positions if you can help it, and be more observant; that would help. You can disagree with me, but I am only trying to keep you safe.”

“I see what you are saying and can agree; I will try,” I said, stepping back to look him in the eyes. “It would help if you spent some time with me, teaching me.”

“Meria, I am the captain–”

“Please? I also have a hard time sleeping alone in that room.”

“You cannot sleep in my room, Meria; it is not proper at all. I would not want to ruin whatever reputation you want to have in Walden,” he said with a grunt as he ran fingers through his wind-swept hair.

“I do not know what that means. I just need to sleep, and it seems that I got used to sleeping beside you.”

“Do mermen and merwomen sleep in the same space before they are betrothed or married?”

“No.”

“Meria, you cannot ask me to sleep in the same bed with you,” he said with a large sigh, rubbing his face.

“Sorry–”

“Don’t be sorry; I am not mad at you. Remember, I hate it when you apologize. We can have supper in my cabin. Would that please you? During that time, we may speak.”

“I think that would be good.”

I was grateful for the opportunity to spend some time with him. It had been too long since the island and the cave. I missed that closeness.

“Also, I need to go into the sea soon.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I crave the sea. It is, possibly, another reason why I cannot sleep. I may need to submerge myself at least once a week.”

“That will be more difficult than you might think,” he said quickly.

“Even still, I need it.”

“I will think of what to do. You do not wish for everyone to know you are a mermaid, right?”

“I do not think so?” I questioned.

“We should keep it to ourselves as long as possible; I do not want any additional unwanted attention directed toward you.”

“Captain–I apologize,” Richard said from behind me, and I turned to see him wet and dripping on the deck, coughing.

“Did I not express when we arrived that *she* was not to be touched?” Dominick shouted.

“You did, Captain.”

“Did it appear when you offered your attention that she wanted more?”

“No, Captain.”

“Do not ever touch a maiden without her permission, ever again. And if by chance you do touch a maiden, pull away immediately when she does not return your affection,” he spat at Richard with a growl.

“Yes, Captain.”

Dominick looked once at me, then back at Richard.

“Do not touch *her*. She is mine.”

Richard nodded.

“Now, in the morning, you will swab the deck till I can see my reflection in the wood,” he commanded.

Then he looked up. There were a few men about. He turned to them all and shouted, “This maiden is mine, and no one is to touch her, but me!” he shouted.

There was a crazy fluttering in my heart at all this mentioning of being Dominick’s, *twice* in such a short amount of time. He had called me *his* mermaid before–so it should not have felt so wonderful, but it did. I could not explain it. That was something that had never happened with Edmar.

“Yes, Captain,” the men said with a salute.

“Get out of my face,” Dominick said, motioning for them to get back to their tasks.

He walked up to me, “May I show the men that you are mine, Meria?” he whispered in a grave tone, his breath heavy and hot upon my ear.

“I thought you did not want to ruin my *reputation*? Whatever that means.”

“I am afraid this may be the only way. If you are the lover of The Cruel Hand, I am sure this problem will end immediately.” His eyes were burning.

“Lover?” *Is that like being betrothed, but not officially?* I wondered.

“Yes, lover,” he nodded. “If I do anything you are uncomfortable with, say so–or push me away, and I will stop, alright?”

I nodded, confused at what was to come, but excited, just the same. In the next instant, he wrapped his arms around my waist and buried his face in the nape of my neck, the scruff of his beard, burning my flesh in a pleasing way. He pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth, and I collapsed into his arms. Lightness and warmth coated me as his lips pressed against my skin even for the small second it was there. He picked me up in his arms and walked down the hallway to his quarters, then passed by his door and stopped at my room.

“Sorry about the show,” he said, setting me down in front of the door. “It is for your own good that they think we are a couple,” he said. I pulled down Dominick's shirt, the one that I was still wearing. His gaze landed on my legs, then moved up to my face.

“I understand; it is probably the best idea. Thank you.”

“You need different clothes. I should have thought of that before,” he grunted, walking into his room, leaving the door open. I stood there, still in

a bit of a daze from what had just happened–so much in a short amount of time.

"You are beautiful, Meria."
The Cruel Hand's Lover.

I touched the side of my mouth, where his lips had been. That small kiss–it felt like nothing I had ever experienced before. I could not help but wonder what a full kiss with Dominick would be like. Kisses with Edmar had been nothing in comparison.

"Here, these seem small. You may have to roll them a bit, but it should be better than that tattered shirt." He handed me a bundle of clothes. I had seen how all the humans on the ship dressed, so I was sure I could figure out how to put an outfit together.

"Thank you, Dominick."

He sighed, "Fine, you can call me that, but please, do not let the crew hear you, if you can help it," he said, turning to walk back to his room.

"Okay," I whispered; then his door closed, and I was alone in the hallway. I was so dry, so warm; I wanted nothing more right then than to dive into the depths of the cool, salty sea. I hoped that Dominick would find a way for me to do that soon. As I made my way to my room, I brushed my throat–the rough spot where his face had been, so warm and tingly with the memory of Dominick's closeness.

I was looking forward to the possibility of something like that happening again, even though I should not have. Perhaps, on the following day, he would need to put on a show for the rest of the crew. Afterall, there were only half a dozen men that evening who saw the display.

After changing into the new clothes, and folding them up to fit better, I lay down on the bed and had a much easier time falling asleep than before.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dominick

"Well, finally," Sands said after I called him to come into my cabin after his knock. He closed the door behind him, and swept across the room, sitting in the chair across from me, sideways. His legs dangled over the edge of one side, and he played with a coin in his hand. I watched as he moved the gold coin across his knuckles, back and forth.

"Finally, what?" I asked, taking my eyes from his parlor trick, back to the maps.

"You claimed her. I have to tell you the things the men said about her below deck? There was a wager on who would get her kiss, first."

Anger. Burning anger rose inside of me, and I clenched my fist.

"Who?"

"Everyone–Are you going to toss *everyone* overboard?"

"I could–"

"No, you could not. Calm yourself. You took care of the problem. No one wishes to cross The Cruel Hand, or be tossed overboard like Richard."

"Sands, I do not have the energy for this today."

“Well, I saw land–just came to tell you. If you are not interested in what I have to say–”

“We’ve arrived?”

“We’ve arrived,” he said with a large grin.

“Get Peter, I need to speak with him.”

“About time; you know, family really should try and make amends.”

“You have made amends with your family?”

“Have no family to make amends with. But I would if I did,” he said, still playing with his coin.

“I am not making amends; get him.”

Sands made his way out of my cabin, and I sank behind the desk. We’d arrived. That was it. For some reason, the joy I thought I would have at being in the Misted Seas, discovering the first island? It was not there. That was all I had wanted for so long. Why was I not more excited about it? Perhaps, I would feel satisfied when I finally found Layla.

“You wanted to see me?” I glanced up at Sands who held Peter's hands behind his back, and Peter looked the worse-for-wear. Of course, he would be, having been held as a prisoner took a toll.

“Yes. You are rescuing someone from Pixie Isle?” I asked.

“I hoped so, but I am no longer in control of this ship,” Peter said.

“Yes, well, we have arrived at the first island, which I believe is Pixie Isle, and I am impressed that you did not attempt to escape or get any of your crew to kill me.”

“I do not want you dead, and I do not care who is captain of this ship as long as I can rescue Gwendolyn; that is my mission.”

“Why would you not wish me dead?” I asked.

“You are my brother–and, believe it or not, I have missed you.”

“Well, I am not anyone to miss–or look up to.”

“I do not know about that. You seem like a good captain. You got us here faster than I had planned.” He paused. “Are you letting me go?”

I was planning on it. No matter my past, no matter my reputation, I never wanted to continue on in that way. Veeto was cruel, and I had no wish to continue in his footsteps. Meria helped me realize that. *Perhaps, there is a better way for me.*

“I am letting you complete your mission. Take a group of men, your captain included, and I will drop you off on Pixie Isle, and I will return in around five days.”

“That should, hopefully, be plenty of time to find her. I hear the island is small; time is different there.”

“I am still the captain of this ship. If the crew does not follow my orders, they will be disposed of. Make that clear to them.”

Peter nodded.

“You know, this ship is a Walden ship.”

“Of course, I know that,” I said impatiently.

“You were always meant to be the captain. Perhaps, the Ancients helped you find your true ship.”

“What do you mean? I imprisoned you and stole this ship.”

“You are Walden’s Crown Prince, so this ship is more yours than anyone else's, even more than it is mine.”

I stood there, dumbfounded. Peter should have hated me, especially after spending the last five nights in the ship’s prison. Yet, he was being kind. He was standing there, telling me that I was the Crown Prince and that the ship was rightfully mine. Why? He was a better man than I would ever be. I was proud of him and happy that he had lived a better life than I had.

I nodded, not sure what to say to that.

Sands smiled at me, but I did not have the mental energy to decipher why *he* was smiling. He led Peter from the room.

“Keep an eye on him!” I called out.

“Will do, Cap! Also, Meria slept poorly last night; she's in pain.” Sands turned around and winked.

Although I hated that he knew that before I did, I knew what that comment meant. I needed to go help Meria. I could take away any pain she had, and I would. I jumped up to find her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Meria

There was a crick in my neck that I tried not to complain about, but I thought that Peter could see it in my face. I sat on the ground beside his cell, early the next morning after the busy evening the night before.

"How are you, Meria?" Peter asked.

"I am fine. I slept a little poorly, and my neck hurts. But your situation is much worse. I am sorry; I should not complain."

"You know, the captain's cabin has a much better bed," Peter said with a raised eyebrow, ignoring my second comment.

"That is where Dominick sleeps."

"Yes, and yet I heard he claimed you last night as his lover."

"He is a good man; he is trying to keep me safe from unwanted attention."

"It is a brilliant idea. While my men are not bad men, you are hard to ignore. A very striking woman."

I felt my cheeks heat and ducked my head. That was not the same feeling I had when Dominick had called me beautiful. Peter's comments made me

feel embarrassed.

“Captain wishes to speak with you, Prince Peter,” Sands said from behind me. I was startled and stood.

“Good morning, Meria.” Sands said with a kind smile.

“Sands,” I said with a nod and a wince. My neck really ached.

“Busy evening last night?” he asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Not really,” I choked.

He walked over to Peter's cell and unlocked it, motioning for him to move out of it. He closed the door behind him, and I pressed myself against the bars so they would have room to pass.

“See you later,” Sands called.

Peter turned to look at me with a smile, and I nodded to him.

Why was Dominick calling him to his cabin? Was he finally going to let him go? Would they work together?

I hoped so.

I made my way to the deck and watched the sea, hoping my neck would feel better with time.

“Meria!” I turned my face from the sea below to see Dominick standing before me.

“Hello,” I said, leaning my back against the side of the ship, making sure to keep my head straight. Slight movements were painful.

“Hello,” he said with a nod. “How was your sleep last night?” he asked.

“Good,” I said with a smile.

“Do not lie to me; your neck hurts.”

“How did you–”

“Sands told me.”

“How did he know?”

“Not sure.”

“Oh–well, I shall be fine,” I said with a wave. He walked closer to me, and before I could blink, his hands were behind my head, moving my hair

to the side and looking at my neck. He rubbed it a bit, and I leaned against him, closing my eyes. It felt so good. His hands were so warm–so comforting, as if the pain in my neck was being erased with his caresses. He was not The Cruel Hand at all. He should have been called The Warm–Hot–Soothing Hand.

"That feels wonderful," I said quietly. He continued kneading my neck. His hands worked so expertly as if they had done that countless times before. Had he? How many maidens had he helped in that way?

"What is the matter? Do you wish me to stop?" he asked. His hands stilled.

"Nothing–it feels wonderful; the pain is gone."

"You got a bit tense for a minute," he said, still not continuing, but I could still feel the heat from his hands.

"Sorry."

"Meria–" he warned, and he removed his hands.

Although the pain was gone, I still wanted his hand's warmth.

"I mean, oh yes, *not* sorry. I am not sorry. I was thinking of something, but I am fine," I said. I did say 'sorry' far too often. I felt my back still pressed against his chest. He leaned down and whispered in my ear like a warm caress, his voice deep and rumbly in a way that made my stomach flip as if I had dived into the sea.

"Have my cabin."

My heart raced so fast at those words.

"I could not," I whispered back rather breathy.

"Yes, you can, if you would like it," he whispered back, his breath tickling my ear. His hands slowly wrapped around my waist as he pulled me even tighter against him. I was sure that in his arms, I would never have any pain, which was strange as his curse was to inflict pain with those very limbs. But there was so much more to Dominick than his curse–so much gentleness and kindness.

"Alright," I said weakly.

"Do not agree unless it is truly what you desire," he said again, still speaking so into my ear, his chin grazing my cheek. I wanted him to never move from that spot; that was what I desired most.

"I desire it," I said. Then the next second, he removed himself from me and stepped away. I turned around to face him. He took a backwards step.

“Dinner tonight in my cabin?” he asked with a tilt of his head and a smile.

“Yes,” I said with a nod.

“See you then,” he said; then he turned, and my jaw dropped when I saw him reach with his bare hands into his pockets and began to put on his gloves.

I made my way to the captain's cabin that evening and knocked on the dark wood of the door. There was a shuffling; then Dominick stood before me. The first thing I noticed other than his handsome face were his gloved hands. I wanted to know more about his curse. His hands had seemed to heal me. After his touch, my head did not hurt at all. I watched as he opened the door wider to let me into his cabin. He shut the door behind me and walked to his desk, rubbing the back of his neck. He winced.

“Are you alright?” I wondered if his neck also hurt.

“Oh, yes, I am fine.” He put his hand down and motioned for me to sit.

Sitting down and taking a look around, I realized that Dominick had yet another layer to him that I did not know about. He was messy. It made me smile. He had papers and maps spread all around his large desk. He had a bowl and a cup on the floor, as if he had put it to the side while he was working and then forgot about it. I looked around to see a closet door with a sleeve sticking out as if it had been closed hastily, and possibly crammed too full. His bed was a pile of pillows and blankets. It did look more comfortable than the one I had slept in next door.

“Sorry, it is a bit messy in here,” he began, and I turned to look at him.

“I do not mind.”

“I will still have to come in here daily, so you must rise and be ready before I report for the day.”

“Who do you report to?”

“Myself–and I am ready at dawn.”

“Okay, I may just sleep as you go about your business in the mornings.”

“No, I’ll have to change.”

“Oh–” I nodded. “Okay.”

He motioned to a small table in a corner of the room, which had the *lovely* gruel I hated upon it. I had learned from my time on that ship that the food was always the same thing, something weird: wet sludge and dry crackers. There were some dried fruit barrels, and I often tossed the sludge and just ate the fruit.

“The food on this ship is awful.”

“It may not be fish–”

“And why not? I do not understand.”

“We can catch some for tomorrow’s dinner if you’d like?”

“Fish the way you make it is better than this.”

“Oh, yes. That’s right; you did not like it, although you ate it.”

“Only to survive. I ate raw fish when you were not looking. And seaweed.”

“I saw you,” he said with a smirk.

“We have much better food in the kingdoms of Terra. This is just easy to transport on a ship, and it does not go bad.”

“It barely keeps us alive. I eat the dried fruit, instead,” I said, spooning a bit of the sludge and letting it splatter back into the bowl. I looked up at Dominick; he was smiling.

“Make sure you eat some of the porridge; it gives you more of what you need, daily, than the fruit,” he began to eat, and it was silent. I took a few bites because I did not wish to die, and my stomach was aching.

“I shall try to eat it more, but it is horrid,” I said, taking a spoonful and eating the sludge.

“I have figured out a way you can go once a week into the water,” Dominick said as he finished his sludge.

“Yes?”

“Night is the only option. I will need to have Sands help."

“Thank you,” I said, taking one last bite of the sludge.

“For what?”

“For helping me. I know I am unfamiliar with humans, and I do appreciate you helping me and teaching me. You may not see it, but you are very kind, Dominick.”

“You’re welcome.” I turned my head to the side, and there was a sharp pain there. I gasped.

“What is it?” Dominick stood, and I watched him as he took off his coat; then slowly, he pinched the fingertips of his black leather gloves and peeled them off. “Does it still hurt?”

“It stopped hurting, but I think I hurt it again by moving my head so quickly.”

“Let me help relieve you of your pain.”

He started uncuffing his white undershirt and I saw the black veins there.

“I am alright. I thought you said you couldn't touch anyone?”

“I can, my touch has two sides.”

“Why are your veins black?”

“It is the result of pain from my curse–awful to look at, isn't it?”

“No–does it hurt?” I asked tenderly.

He laughed. “Pain is a constant in my life, and I do not mind it anymore.”

I did not believe that. Constant pain? That had to drain a person. How was he standing there before me?

“I mind.”

“Meria–I can take your pain away.”

“But what happens to you? I know you did something earlier. I saw you without your gloves after we spoke, and when I came in here, it seemed that your neck hurt. Do you take away the pain, but put it on yourself?”

“Let me help you, Meria.”

“No, I do not want to cause *you* pain.”

“It is nothing. Truly, I have helped many with worse injuries.”

“What do you mean?” I was surprised. “Do you take on others’ pain often?”

“Meria, I just want to help you.”

“Tell me, Dominick.”

“Sometimes, when I act as the Prince, I go to the local ports and have Sands find those who are suffering. It is not healing I give people. I just take away their pain with the hope that they will then have the strength to recover.”

“Dominick,” I said, my mouth open wide, amazed by that man.

“It is nothing, Meria.”

“It is everything, Dominick.” I stepped up to him. “You are so selfless.”

“No, I am not. I selfishly do it–to ease my guilt.”

I didn't believe that. “Right now? Helping me with my pain will relieve guilt?”

“Meria, stop this, and let me take away your pain.”

“Is that a demand?”

“No–you have a choice; you always have a choice,” he trailed off. “But I would feel better if you felt better.”

“Will you be okay?” I asked as I stepped closer to him.

“You ask that–as if *touching* you would be a burden.”

“It isn’t?” I whispered as he pressed his chest against mine, one hand at my lower back. Dominick knew that mermaids had magical healing abilities. We had discussed it in the cave. The stipulation for it to work was that it had to be given freely to another, which was why the humans had never been successful in using our healing when they had captured us and tried to use our power for their gain. Unless within a mermaid’s heart, she desired to use her magic, it would not work. I focused on my magic and waited for Dominick to touch my skin. I wanted to heal whatever pain he had, and that, I desired with all of my heart.

“No–not a burden at all,” he whispered into my ear as he reached with one hand, moving my hair over my shoulder, pressing his warm hands to my neck.

The instant our skin touched, my pain was gone, and I poured all the healing magic I could into him as tears dropped down my face. He pulled back a little, and our eyes met, but I reached up behind me and held his hand against my skin, wanting to heal as much of his pain as I could. I watched with joy as his eyes lightened, as if the years of pain, which had darkened them, had been removed. He finally got his hand free of mine and pulled away, raising his hands up.

“I am so sorry,” he gasped, walking closer to me, but then he stepped back, holding his hands to his sides as if they would poison me.

“I don't feel it anymore,” I said with a smile. “Thank you.”

“What?” he gasped. “Do not lie to me, Meria. I did not–Something else happened.”

“Your curse is very effective.”

“But I didn't feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“Usually, when I take pain from someone, I feel it within myself, tenfold. When I did it earlier today, I felt it, but right now–I don’t feel it. When that

happens, when I do not feel pain, that usually means I am inflicting it."

"Truly, Dominick, I did not feel anything but relief." He stepped even further away, running his hand over his face. He walked to his desk and put his gloves back on in silence.

"You promise me, Meria. You really did not feel any pain? I need to know."

"No, no pain at all."

"So odd. I have something I need to do." He walked to the door of the cabin.

"But what about me going into the sea?"

"I will return; make yourself comfortable." Without looking back at me, he was out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dominick

I walked quickly from the cabin, needing some air. I did not know if it was a mermaid thing or not, but sometimes, when I was too near her, my head started to feel light and dizzy, and my heart beat rather quickly.

But the most shocking thing was that my touch took away her pain without taking any of her pain upon myself. How was that? It felt good to touch her–calming, like a balm to a wound I always had, one that had never healed.

It would have been nice to always feel that way. Was that what it was like for most people? *Do most people walk around truly painless?*

"Well, you look deep in thought," I turned to see Sands near the stern of the ship.

"When I touch Meria, she has no pain, and neither do I," I spilled out without thinking better of it.

"Truly? What does that mean?" Sands asked, concern in his tone.

"I have no idea. Maybe because of who she is." I looked at Sands,

“Yes, Mermaids have many magical abilities. But you two also have some sort of connection.”

“She expressed that she has magic.”

“So, then, is it really so surprising?”

“It was surprising in the moment to feel what a life could be like without my curse–that was incredible.”

“Perhaps, you will break it.”

“I am sure I will never be so lucky.”

“Well–” he began, but I stopped him, needing to change the subject.

“Tomorrow, Peter and a small group of men are going to Pixie Isle. We are leaving them there to complete their task, and then, we are heading to the Mirror Sea.”

“Are we coming back for Peter?” he asked.

“Yes, I do not wish anything to happen to him.”

“And Meria?”

“Yes, the reason I am telling you about this is because she needs to swim every once in a while. I will need your help for that.”

“Okay, night would be best,” Sands said, rubbing his jaw.

“Agreed.”

“I will try and figure out the best time when no men are on deck,” he said.

“Okay, hurry with whatever orders you need. She should probably swim tonight; she is suffering without bathing in the sea for so long.”

“Aye! Captain! I need about an hour.”

“Okay, and after, be sure to get some sleep. There is no telling what danger lurks in those waters, and I need you sharp.”

“I am the sharpest dagger–”

“Sands–” I sighed.

“Okay, understood. I do hope there is gold near the Mirror Sea.”

“I hope my sister is there. I do not think it has been traveled upon by sailors since before the Great War. Any magical creatures will not take kindly to us being there.”

“I am not afraid of a few magical creatures,” he said with a slap to my back. “I will be back,” Sands said, and he slipped away from me, ordering the crew members below deck.

I waited until everyone was beneath the deck, then dimmed the four main lanterns on the ship, hoping that by doing so, it would stop most of the light

from shining upon the water, avoiding giving Meria away.

I walked to my new sleeping quarters in the royal cabin and stripped off my boots, pulled on a worn pair of pants, and took off my jacket, vest, and shirt. If she was going into the water, I was going to accompany her, for safety reasons, of course.

She's a mermaid. The ocean is the safest place for her. She does not need you. I shoved that thought away. I looked down at my gloves which reached up to my mid-arm. I did not have to wear them around Meria, so I pulled them off, feeling a release as I looked at my hands. The black in my veins spread every single time I took away someone's pain, a darkness that I was sure would overpower me, someday–and eventually, it would be my end. A rightful end for me after what I had done. I looked more closely at my veins and noticed that on my hands, the veins were not as dark–it was as if they were lessening.

How is this possible?

I walked quickly from the room, feeling the wooden boards beneath my bare feet, and missing the loud click of my boots as I walked. I reached the captain's cabin door and knocked three times. Meria opened it and stuck her head out, looking back and forth, before her eyes rested upon mine. Her eyes widened as she looked at me. People did not like my black veins, which is why I covered them, or at least, that was part of the reason. She had seen them on Marren Island, but only part of them. They were, at that moment, on full display. A part of me was incredibly anxious to know what she thought of them. Did she hate them? Did they make me look like the monster I was?

"I know–" I began to apologize for my appearance.

"Dominick?" she gasped, holding a hand to her mouth. Then she did something I never expected. "Oh, Dominick!" she whispered and touched my chest, her warmth reaching deep inside of me. She began to trail one particular black vein with her finger.

It was hard to speak, hard to do anything, but I cleared my throat.

"This is my curse; I am fine. Sorry, it is unsightly. Are you ready to swim?" I wanted to sound confident and strong, but my voice was airy and light, tentative, and to my shame, fearful.

"Unsightly? Is that what you think of yourself? That is the last thing I think or anyone else who sees you thinks, Dominick."

"What?"

“You are the most handsome human, or merman, I have ever seen, dark veins and all.”

I gulped. I liked that. My heart seemed to like it as well, for it was beating erratically, as if it was trying to reach her touch–those fingers on my bare chest. My heart always beat faster whenever I was around Meria, especially when she said kind things to me or touched me.

“Thank you, Meria,” I said, not knowing what else to say. I looked down at her, examining her, seeing–

Is she wearing a dress? I thought.

What she wore was a thin slip of some sort, barely reaching to her ankles.

“What is *that*?” I asked in shock, taking a step back and breaking the connection. Meria looked down at herself, touching the thin fabric of the dress at her stomach.

“Sands gave it to me; he said it was a good idea to wear it when I swim. I can tie up the lower part like this.” She began to lift up her dress to tie it, exposing way too much of her legs than what was proper, once again, and I grabbed her hands. It felt so strange not needing to fear touching her with my bare skin, and I caressed her skin, looking into her eyes, waiting for her to be in pain–to pull away from my painful touch. But she only smiled and moved in even closer to me.

She moved closer to me. She wants my touch. What is happening?

“Do not do that here.” I was unable to fully draw in breath. Meria was going to make my heart explode from my chest.

“But it is only you and I; I trust you,” she shrugged.

She should never trust any man that much, except maybe her husband. I gulped again and ran a hand down my face, trying to forget the image of her bare legs that were seared into my memory. She may have been a mermaid, but she had such beautiful legs. I shook my head.

St*op thinking about her legs.*

“I cannot even begin to explain.” I cleared my throat. “Wait till we are in the water, okay?” I tried to sound kind, but knew I was doing a bad job of it.

“Okay,” she said slowly. Her face held confusion, but I was not about to explain. She was a mermaid. She was unfamiliar with human modesty. That was just a part of her mermaid culture.

I turned without saying anything and walked to the edge of the ship where Sands stood.

“Oh, good; it fits you,” he said, looking behind me as we approached.

“Yes, it fits well. Thank you, Sands!” she said happily as if what she was wearing was not making it harder for me to breathe, which was not ideal when about to dive into the sea.

“Anytime,” he said with a wink to her.

“Yes, thank you, *Sands*. Thank you so much, once again, for meddling,” I grunted.

He chuckled. “Here to be helpful.”

Helpful? Now, that is a word I would never use in this situation.

“Now, make sure we are not seen,” I said, walking up to the railing of the ship. I motioned for Meria to come beside me. Then I dove into the sea. I desperately needed to cool off, and my last hope was that the cold sea would calm my heart.

Meria

“He's showing off for you; I doubt he can outswim you,” Sands chuckled beside me.

“Is he a good swimmer?”

“Yes, always beat me, but you are one of my favorite people because you will defeat him,” he winked.

I laughed and turned to look down below. The sea called to me–the waves humming, like the melody of a song–the song that lived within all mermaids’ hearts, a song of home and of peace. I wanted to be embraced again by the sea. Without another thought, I dove from the ship. Once I was engulfed by the sea, my tail appeared, and it felt like a best friend had come back to me, one I had missed more than anything else. I breathed in the cool salt water and smiled. I dove, twirling around as I went; then once reaching the bottom, I swam back up and jumped from the water with a call to the sea within my melody and upon my lips. The calls of the mermaids were magical, and we rarely used them as father said that they had once lured humans to us, but I could not hold my voice back. Once I swam a bit, I found Dominick floating on his back, looking at the stars.

“Do you feel better?” he asked as I swam up beside him.

“Much better. I needed this so much. Thank you, Dominick.”

He turned to look at me, his eyes capturing mine in the moonlight.

“You look so right here.”

“Well, I was a mermaid first–”

“I will try and make sure you can do this as often as possible. I am sorry I did not think of it.”

“I should have realized how much I needed the sea. It was foolish of me to think I could be fully human.”

I did not know how long we were out there when, suddenly, I felt something in the water below us. A moment earlier, when I had first reached the bottom of that very deep sea, there was only sand, down below us, but I was very aware of the dangers within the sea, and I knew that things could change quickly.

I dove back under and searched the water. There was something coming, and I could sense it. I called out in my mermaid song of peace. I was hopeful that it was a school of fish, even a pod of whales. But as I waited under the water, I saw the fins of sharks. I burst from the water to see Dominick still floating.

“Dominick, there are sharks. We have to–” but just as I was trying to warn him, my fears were realized, when with a grunt, Dominick was pulled down into the depths of the sea. His arm was in the jaws of one of the largest sharks I had ever seen.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Dominick

That was my end, and I was not sad at all. Well, maybe a little, because I wanted to make sure that Meria would be okay. But if the sharks had their way with me, that would give her enough time to get back onto the ship. Instead of death, however, my head breached the surface, and just as the breath I had been holding was released, there was a scream.

Who is screaming?

As I floated in the water, I saw the fin of a shark and felt a second distinct sharp pain in my arm. I cursed as I saw the water around me, dark red with my blood, attracting even more sharks to us.

"Dominick!" I heard Meria shout, but I could not see her.

Where is she? Is she alright? I need to save her.

There was a stiff force that pushed into me, and the shark was back on my arm. He dragged me down into the ocean; then, his jaws let go of me, and I looked up to see Meria in the water above me. She dove down to catch me before I sank to the bottom of the sea. Soon, we were above the surface of the ocean, and I took a deep breath.

“I've got you,” she whispered.

“Just leave me here. I’d gladly drown in the fathoms to save you. Sands can pull you up,” I groaned as the pain in my arm grew. My sight was fuzzy, and my head felt heavy.

“Of course, not!” She closed her mouth, and the most beautiful song I had ever heard echoed inside of me. I gaped at her; she was beautiful, magnificent, everything good in the world. I wanted to follow her anywhere and everywhere.

“Sorry, I must not stop the song.” She paused, looking at me with a frown as she kept swimming us back toward the ship. She reached the dangling rope, and tied it around my waist.

“No, do not have me go first,” I whispered, pain making it hard to think straight. I had so much pain I had dealt with in my life, but that pain was different, more acute and sharp–probably due to the teeth of that shark, which sank deep into my flesh, along with the blood I was losing.

“Do as I say, Dominick,” she sang sweetly, somehow, without moving her lips, and I nodded. Of course, I would do as she said–everything she said for the rest of my life.

It took a few minutes for Sands to pull me up. Once I was rolled out and onto the deck, I tried to breathe steadily and count the stars to keep myself conscious, but as soon as I saw Meria safe beside me, I smiled and closed my eyes. I opened them again, and just the sight of her made the pain less acute.

“Ancients, you are beautiful–and *safe*,” I said.

“It seems he becomes endearing when bitten by a shark,” I heard Sands laugh.

“That is just my song. It will wear off,” she said, touching my arm and my face, and everywhere she touched me, it felt warm and wonderful.

“Rest, Dominick; I will take care of you,” she said, turning my face so I was able to gaze into those beautiful, light blue eyes, bright as the moon behind her, like the twinkling stars–a beacon of peace and hope in my painful world.

I reached out my good arm and caressed her cheek, brushing some of the wet, blond-pink strands to the side.

“Please, take care of me for the rest of my life. I need you, forever, ” I whispered.

She smiled so wide, and I wanted to have a painting of that smile hanging where I could see it every single morning when I woke up.

“If you would have me, handsome pirate prince, I would never leave your side. Now, let's get you up.”

I was shuffled between Sands and Meria. They were on either side of me, guiding me into the cabin. Once placed on the bed, my head became even more dizzy.

“I am going to sleep.”

“Sleep then. You shall be well once you awaken,” were the words she caressed against my skin, her kisses on my cheek and her warm breath comforting me in the best of ways. I nodded slowly and let myself fall into the depths of unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Meria

“You know how to tend wounds?” Sands asked after Dominick passed out.

“I do. If you don't mind, I need some clean linens and water.”

Sands nodded and left the room. I only had a few minutes to heal him. Mermaid tears were unique. They were rare and hard-won, and came at a great cost to mers’ energy and magic, but after conjuring them, and thereafter sleeping, I would be fine. I did not want Sands to know of that ability because I still did not trust most humans. I knew Sands would not abuse me in such a way, but that information in the wrong hands could kill thousands of my kind–as it had before throughout Terra’s history. I had taken some of Dominick’s pain away already, mostly with my touch, but my tears could heal those wounds as if they had never been there. It was easy for me to cry, because seeing Dominick, the strong and brave pirate prince so out of it–so weak, that both frightened and saddened me. I leaned over his mangled arm. It was, still, mostly connected, which was a gift from the Ancients. I had seen far worse injuries. Sharks liked to eat mermaids,

too. I gulped, focusing my mind on the task before me. I had never used my mermaid tears for something so serious before. We were not allowed to use them unless given permission. I would have broken every rule, if needed, for Dominick.

I looked at his black veins, wishing I could heal those pains also, but I could not when I needed to direct all my magic to the healing of his arm. I vowed to myself that I would heal every single pain Dominick had ever felt, someday. That man, he was the best of men.

I leaned over his wound, and my sadness deepened, and I let two tears fall into his wounds. Lights emanated from the places where the tears touched him.

I sang faintly:

Mother Ocean, to you I plead.
Father Creator of the world we know,
I call upon you now–please, save this soul.
Heal his flesh so that he may be made whole.

I watched, as slowly the wound began to stitch itself back together. I traced the skin that was healing. Once the wound was nothing but a scar, I noticed how the healed section of his arm no longer held the black veins. I touched the skin, turning his arm around; there were no more black veins there, either.

How much of my magic will be needed to take away all his pain? I wondered, just as my head felt light, and I knew that I needed to rest. Sands came in and set the linens on a side table, near the door.

"I'll be back," he said before leaving quickly.

Grateful that he did not stay, I walked over to the clean linens. I needed to, somehow, hide how quickly he had healed. Perhaps Sands had not seen or maybe he did not understand the full extent of Dominick's injuries. There was a lot of blood; maybe, it was hard to tell? I quickly wrapped his fully healed arm, and I sat down in the chair behind the desk, my mind going in and out of clarity.

I should get up and change into dry clothes–but standing up right then seemed near impossible. Plus, I did not mind leaving the ocean on me.

"Thank you, Mother Ocean; Thank you, Father Creator–"

I closed my eyes after taking one last look at Dominick, and I smiled; then I took the rest I needed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dominick

"Do not wake him; he needs rest. I am first mate. What's the problem?" Sands asked.

"There is something stuck to the side of the ship. It's slowing us down."

"Are you sure?" Sands asked.

"Yes–you see, there are tentacles on the hull."

"An octopus–harmless," Sands said with a grunt.

"You don't understand, this is a *giant* octopus."

I opened my eyes and sat up with a start.

"Rest–" I turned to see Peter standing beside me.

Peter? Why is he not below the ship, locked up?

"What happened?"

"You don't remember being bitten by a shark last night?" he asked with wide eyes. I looked at my arm, which did not hurt in the slightest; however, it was bandaged.

"Why are *you* here?"

“I am your brother; I wanted to make sure you didn’t die. Meria released me so I could see you. I like her,” he said with raised brows.

“I am alive; you can go,” I said with a wave.

Sands walked to us with a smile. “Peter has been very helpful. He swore not to cause a mutiny. Are you feeling better?” he asked.

“Where is Meria?" I asked, starting to get out of bed, but Peter put a hand on my chest to stop me.

“She said you need to rest for most of the day, today, to restore your blood or something. You lost a ton of blood. It was a heck of a time cleaning it off the deck.”

“Where is she?” I was confused.

“You like her,” Sands wiggled his eyebrows at me.

“Shut it, Sands, not now. What is this thing about a giant octopus?”

“I will tell you in a minute, but for now, you should know that last night you were saying the sweetest things to Meria–that she was beautiful–that you wanted her to stay with you forever,” Sands said, clasping his hands to his chest as if he were a child, excited for a sweet.

I grunted, finally moving from the bed. I felt a bit light-headed, but other than that, I was fine. I noticed that I was still only wearing pants, and I quickly went to my closet to change.

“Please do not take those off with me here!”

I turned as I was about to slip off my pants to see Meria sitting in the chair at my desk.

“Are you well?” I asked, as she looked very tired. Her beauty was still evident, but her eyes seemed wilted.

“I am fine as long as you do not take your clothes off. I can only handle so much,” she said with a frown, pulling a blanket up from her lap to cover half of her face.

“You let Peter out?”

“He’s your brother, and I thought he should be allowed to see you after such an injury. He was worried about you, and as Sands said, he promised not to take the ship’s command from you.”

I turned to Peter. “If you give me any hint that you are planning anything–”

Peter raised his hands. “I don’t care who captains this ship, truly, I only want to rescue my friend. You let me do that, and we will have no problems.”

I sighed and nodded, not sure what else to say to that. I was outnumbered. I turned back to Meria as she stood up. She was still wearing the same slip of a dress from the night before. I watched as she slowly made her way over to where Sands, Peter, and I stood. She almost fell over, but I moved to catch her.

"Sorry, I am still a little tired, it seems," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Go, lay down; the bed is free."

"Yes, sir," she said with a chuckle. I grabbed my clothes and briskly walked out of the door with Peter at my heels.

"You need to rest, Dom," Peter said.

"Dom." That sent a pain through my chest. I wasn't sure if I liked it, but it did something to me.

"No, it seems there is a giant octopus trying to eat the ship. I am needed; plus, my arm feels fine," I said.

"Hard to believe. I wonder if you might have lost it. I am prepared with options to replace it, should that be required," Peter offered.

"Replace what?" I asked.

"Well, your hand, of course–if you've lost it."

"Nonsense," I grunted as I entered the smaller room that Meria had used. Peter, of course, remained on the other side of the door, still talking to me as I dressed. It reminded me of the time when he had wobbled down the hallways in the castle after me with his toothless grin and the way he called me "Dom" because he could not pronounce my full name.

"I was thinking, you could attach a sword to it." There was a pause. "Or a fake hand–made out of wood. I am sure someone could craft something handsome enough for you. We could commission an artist to carve little ships and waves onto it, make it personal."

"I am not losing my hand," I grunted. He was worse than Sands.

"I also thought about a hook–quite fitting for a pirate. You could *hook* all who get in your way–slice them right through if it is sharp enough."

I opened the door, and Peter stopped.

"Are you done? I have things to do, *Prince*," I said.

"Sure, *Crown Prince*, but you like the hook idea, don't you?"

"I am not playing this game, Peter," I said, walking down the hall.

"It is not a game. I mean, it is an important thing to think of. I mean, you should be prepared. If I lost a leg, of course, I would commission a nice

pegleg–”

“Captain!” Sands called, and I walked away from Peter and some of the crew.

“What is happening?” I asked as I reached Sands, Peter following behind me.

“There seems to be a rather large octopus attached to the ship, Nick. It is slowing us down.”

I walked over to the side of the ship and looked out. The sea was misted, and I could not see far in front of us. I had read about the terrors that kept the Misted Seas safe from humans–the monsters and creatures who only had one purpose: hunt and kill. From what I had learned, they simply waited for prey to pass by. It would be hard to release the suction of the tentacles and to remove it from the ship. Small creatures attached themselves all the time. I moved back, and a large purple appendage reached out, nearly hitting me in the head. Some of the mist parted enough to see that, indeed, it was a gigantic octopus. Its tentacles were very wide, and I was sure it would have no problem wrapping around a human body and pulling it to a watery grave. I moved back away and went around to all sides of the ship. It seemed that it had us entirely in its grasp.

“What are we going to do?” Peter asked, running up to me as I tried to move the wheel and realizing it was stuck. If we did not remove that octopus soon, our ship would crash on the isle that was, according to the maps, just a few hundred feet from us.

Meria, I thought as I looked out into the clouded fog. She was from the sea. Perhaps, she would know what to do.

“Keep the men busy. Do not provoke the creature. Give me some time to think of a plan. Have the men keep quiet, and away from the railing,” I said to Sands and Peter, who had come up beside me. Sands did not look at all fearful–typical for him.

“Will do, but for the record, I do think a hook would be mighty fine if your arm doesn't make it,” Sands started up.

“Really, right now?” I said to Sands as he chuckled, turning to Peter.

“See, it was a good idea,” Peter said, folding his arms.

“There is a giant octopus pulling our ship into the sea! Get to work; we can make jokes later,” I grunted and turned my back to them.

“Yes, captain,” Sands said. I walked quickly to my cabin, grateful that Peter was no longer following me. I entered, closing the door quickly

behind me. Meria was laying in my bed, her light blond-pink hair, spilling wildly about my pillow. She looked so peaceful–so beautiful.

"Meria?" I asked delicately. Her eyes fluttered open. I wished that I did not have to wake her.

"Yes?" she asked, opening her eyes fully and focusing on me.

"I need your help. I am so sorry," I said.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There is a gigantic octopus stuck to the entire bottom and all sides of the ship–"

"So the legends are true; *she* is real."

"She?"

"The giant Octopus, we call her *Kaia*. She protects the isles beyond Marren from humans."

"Can you–Do you know–Can you speak with her or something?" I asked, feeling foolish as I spoke.

"They don't speak, but I can help."

"How can you help?"

"I cannot explain it, exactly; however, the crew will discover that I am a mermaid, as I need to go into the water–"

"No–no, there is no way you are getting into the water with that thing."

"Dominick, I have to."

"No–there could still be sharks; we can find another way."

"Sounds as if there is only an octopus. This is why I am here, isn't it? So I can get you safely to the Mirror Sea?" she asked with a smile.

"Meria–"

"If Kaia is here, the sharks are long gone; she could eat them easily," she said.

"Even still–what if it wraps one of those arms around you?"

"Kaia does not like *humans*; mermaids are of no interest to her."

"How do you know? What if–" I could not let her go. She had already saved me twice. I owed her so much.

She got out of bed, a little wobbly.

"You need rest."

"If it's Kaia, we don't have much time," she said, moving to the door. "Prepare your men for a mermaid among them." I followed her out the door. As much as I wanted to keep her safe, she knew the sea better than I did.

“I am coming with you.”

“Absolutely not.” She stopped and turned to look at me.

“She is not here for me; she is here for *you*. Kaia was *spelled* to protect magical beings from humans, Dominick. You would die in those waters. I am a mer; really, I will be fine.”

“Captain! The ship is starting to sink!” a sailor called.

I looked at Meria, who looked as if she were seeking my permission. I sighed, and nodded.

“Have all the men meet me on deck, now,” I growled, and Meria walked to the helm.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Meria

I walked to the leeward side of the ship and looked down. It was pretty incredible to see her in person. I had only heard stories about her. She was magnificent. It was said that Mother Ocean and the Creator gave life to the mermaids to help watch over the animals of the seas. I was not afraid of Kaia; I stood in awe of her. We all had a purpose in the world. Even the sharks from the night before were only doing as they were made to do: protect and eat.

"Kaia," I whispered into the sea breeze, letting it humm in the air. I turned one last time to see Dominick talking with the crew; then I dove into the sea. The cool, salty waters engulfed me, embraced me, and welcomed me. I took a few moments to enjoy my home before I swam under the boat. I made my way around her huge body, searching for her eyes. After a few minutes, I saw them. Each eye was the size of a dolphin.

"Kaia–" I called to her. She turned a little as if wanting to get a better look at me. As the ship was in her grasp, I did not want her moving much, so I swam right in front of her so she could see me.

I sang to her:

Kaia, defender of the oceans;
Kaia, blessed daughter of the sea–

I sang a song of peace and love, and I saw Kaia's eyes focus upon me. As I continued to lure her into a sense of peace with the movement of the sea's currents, her tentacles began to slip into the water. The bottom of the ship, which was where her large body was still attached, was the last part she held to. Her eyes seemed to cloud over as I came closer and sang more about peace and rest. Finally, after what seemed hours, Kaia released her grip on the ship and sank down into the water. I darted away from each of her huge tentacles as they swung wide in the water after dropping from the vessel. I swam quickly away as her body released the hull completely, causing the ship to bob up and down. After making sure Kaia was gone, I raced to the surface and popped out of the water. I looked around for a line to pull myself back onto the ship when I saw over a dozen sets of eyes upon me from the railings of the ship.

"She defeated the beast!" Sands called, and there arose a cheer, louder even than the crashing waves against the ship.

"Our own magical mermaid to protect us on our journey!" I heard Prince Peter call out as I wrapped the rope around my waist and was pulled up. I tried to straighten my shirt over my tail so when my legs emerged, it would cover me properly enough for human eyes. I heard the gasps as they saw my turquoise tail before it changed.

As I reached the deck of the ship, Dominick was there. He wrapped his arms around my waist.

"None of you are to speak a single word about her–about this–to anyone. Do you hear me?" Dominick growled at the smiling crew. It was hard to focus on his words when he held me so close to him. I clung to him, though. I was drained from once again singing my song and from the use of my magic. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my face into his shoulder. He lifted me up, bracing my weight against him.

There was silence, and I opened my eyes, taking in the crew, Sands, and Prince Peter.

The crew nodded, almost in unison; it was so surprising.

“If anyone even *thinks* about saying anything, you will be gutted like a fish and meet your end in the fathoms, after you meet *my* hand!”

“Of course, Captain. Thank you, Meria, for saving us,” Prince Peter said with a bow.

I looked up to see the rest of the crew also giving me a bow, following their Prince’s example. I was grateful for him. He told his crew, when they had come down to try to break him out of his cell, that he demanded, as their prince, that they obey Captain Nick, The Cruel Hand. Peter loved his brother, and I knew Dominick loved Peter.

“We have heard very little of your kind, and never believed that merfolk still existed. It is an honor,” Prince Peter said.

I smiled and nodded. Dominick’s grip on my waist tightened as my body grew even more exhausted. He lifted me into his arms, tightly against his chest, and my feet were in the air.

“Get to work,” Dominick barked, and I felt the rumbling of his voice against my cheek; then he pressed me to his chest. My head felt heavy. He shifted me so my head was under his chin.

“I've got you. Rest, Meria. You saved us all; you are incredibly wonderful, beautiful, everything–” but I did not hear the rest of what he said before I lost consciousness.

Chapter Thirty

Meria

I had never felt so drained of my magic in my entire life. I did not open my eyes as I waited to hear who was in the room with me. I knew that I had to be in Dominick's cabin. I waited for a few moments, not hearing anything, only feeling a weight, a pressure, on my legs. Maybe that was because I was still not used to my legs? I had changed into a mermaid while still exhausted and then back into a human again. I was still wearing the same, long, white shirt, which was still slightly damp.

I was incredibly grateful that I was able to help the crew and Dominick. It felt wonderful going into the sea and helping save so many lives. I was glad that I was useful, important, and needed. I'd felt more like a burden with all the new things Dominick had to teach me about the human world.

I finally opened my eyes and used my arms behind me to pull myself up to a sitting position. As I looked at my legs, which were covered by Dominick's red blanket, I saw the reason my legs felt heavy. There lay a sleeping Dominick, his bandaged arm above his head and his head resting right upon my legs. His other arm was dangling at his side. His dark brown

hair had fallen in front of his face, and one small tendril of it was moving up and down with his breaths. He looked so peaceful, so incredibly handsome like always, but there was a vulnerability about him as he slept. I looked at the raised, pink scar on his cheek. I wondered where it had come from, and I wanted to heal it. I felt my cheeks become wet as I continued to look at him, and wonder about all the pain he had endured throughout his life.

I could take it away.

As I continued to watch him, it seemed he could sense it for he began to stir, and with a low groan, he pulled back and removed his head from my legs. I quickly wiped at my face. I did not think there was any magic in those tears as I did not put any healing intent to them, but if there was any way they could help him anyway, I reached out quickly and wiped those tears on his arm, draped over my legs, making sure to touch his skin.

"Meria?" He asked, rather groggy.

"Hello," I said as his eyes blinked rapidly, taking in where we were.

"Sorry–I didn't mean to fall asleep, I was–it was only that I was worried about you. You saved us," he said, pulling back his injured arm, which was still across my legs, but just slightly. I would miss that weight when he removed it.

"Yes, sorry. It drains my life force when I use my magic."

"'Life force'?" he asked with a look of shock about him. "What does that mean?" He seemed startled–horrified, and I wanted to calm him.

"My magic is called my life force, sometimes. Do not worry, I am not going to die."

"Good–because I couldn't–that would be–" He brushed his hair away from his forehead. "I could not live with myself if something happened to you."

That sounded like he liked me, right?

I knew that I liked him.

"Speaking of healing and saving." I watched as he undid the bandage and set it on the side of the bed, raising his arm to me. "You did this, too? Sands and Peter thought I was going to lose my arm. How does this wound, now, look as if it has healed for a year, not just a day?"

"You are aware–that I have some–*abilities*; I told you on the island," I said, nervously.

“I do remember, but this–” he looked so amazed, turning his hand over, looking at it and his arm. “I had no idea how powerful it was, your abilities,” he said, looking from his healed hand and arm, then over to me. Admiration was upon his face. I felt my cheeks warm.

“I would rather the other humans not know about this ability if possible,” I said, knowing he was someone I could trust.

“Yes, I will not tell a soul. However, I am concerned.”

“Concerned?” I asked.

“This ability–if it injures your ‘life force,’ I must demand that you *never* do it again.”

“Dominick, I am–” I paused, feeling bad for doing something without asking him. But surely, he did not wish to die. I could not have let him die. “I am sorry.”

After I spoke, the next second, he was leaning over me, his face was only a few inches away from mine.

“Do not let me have my way. Remember? We have come so far. You do not have to agree with me,” he said with a kind smile. His warm breath caressed my face, and I wanted to never move from that spot. His warmth was like the tropical waters in the Southern Seas.

“Sorry, I–”

“Stop it,” he demanded, but as he did so, he brushed his cheek against my cheek, the stubble of his jaw, marking my skin, making it tingle.

“Okay, sorry–”

“Stop apologizing,” he whispered into my ear.

“But you are upset,” I whispered back.

Regretfully, he pulled away, but then, he looked into my eyes again.

“So, do you regret helping me?” he asked.

“No–of course, not,” I said, and he caressed the side of my face, moving a lock of hair and tucking it behind my ear. He had no gloves on, and his skin was on mine. I never had felt anything so wonderful as those touches from Dominick.

“Then, do not apologize for it. Stand up for yourself, Meria.”

“I just–” I stopped, unsure of what to say, or how to ‘*stand up for’* myself, how to exactly express what I desired, and why I did what I did.

“No, go on.”

“I am not used to having an opinion, and when on a rare occasion I do have one, I am not used to expressing it.”

“Never heal me again,” he said with another caress of my skin, his thumb so dangerously close to my lips. How my lips ached for his lips. I looked at his mouth; he was smiling, but only just slightly. If someone did not know him, I was sure they would not see it, but I did.

I could not agree to never heal him again. I would give him all of my magic if I could in order to help him. He had become so incredibly *dear* to me.

Dear. He is dear to me. What is this I am feeling? What is this between us–a charged, unfamiliar magic that seems to draw us together? I wondered. *Is this what true love feels like?*

I knew that what I had with Edmar was not anything close to what I felt with Dominick. My heart sank inside of me as I thought about the life I almost had been confined to, a life where I was married to Edmar, and where I never would have known Dominick. That could have been my life, and it was horrible to think of it.

Whatever it was between Dominick and me, it was more beautiful than anything I had ever seen or felt in all my life, under the sea and above.

“No?” I questioned.

“Better–but maybe, do not answer it like a question.” He paused and moved further back. His eyes looked so angry, and it made me nervous. His hand dropped from my face and rested upon the edge of the bed.

“Don't you *ever,* Meria, heal me and cause yourself to lose some of your ‘life force’; do you hear me?” he said harshly, but I could see the kindness there in his eyes, the playfulness hidden there.

He was testing me. I had no doubt that those were his real feelings, but the thing I liked about Dominick so much was how even when we had differing opinions, he gave me information, reasons for *his* perspectives, and yet, when I disagreed, he still let me, even encouraged me. He let me believe and do as I wished. I had never had such freedom. Dominick was opening up a new world to me, not just a life above the sea or that strange human life, but so much more.

“No, Dominick, I will not do as you say,” I said, trying to sound confident, but I had a shift in my voice.

“That is good,” he said with a nod. “But truly, if healing me hurts you, if helping the crew with that monster hurt you, I cannot let you keep doing it.”

“It is not painful. It only drains me. As long as I rest, I am well. I want to help. That is why I am here, Dominick. We have a deal. I will help you, and

then you will help me find my mother."

"I was thinking about that. Prince Peter might be better at helping you find your mother."

"I know he could help me, too, but my deal is with *you*. I am a mermaid of my word," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I do not want anything to happen to you, Meria," he sighed, wiping his face with his hand, dragging it down, and as I watched, I wished I could have touched his face–trace every curve, kiss that scar until it no longer existed, kiss every single dark vein until he couldn't remember ever having pain.

My thoughts surprised me. My feelings were so strong, so raw, flowing through my entire body, and they were for Dominick.

"I am okay, Dominick, truly. Mermaids are strong."

"Thank you for helping. I do not know what I would have done without you. If you ever need or desire anything, please let me know."

"I was wondering if I could get some clothes?"

"I am sorry; we do not have any gowns."

"A gown?"

"It is what women wear. They do not wear trousers as you have been wearing."

"Oh–"

"As soon as we make port in Walden, I will buy you all the human women clothing and gowns you could ever desire," he said, looking into my eyes, clearing his throat, then standing, his hands on his thighs as he did so. When he stood fully, I noticed that he had not changed his clothing since our swim; he still wore the blood-soaked trousers. He had placed a loose fitting tunic on, so I could not see his chest, but he needed rest, too. I did not want to take his bed. The one in the other room was not nearly as comfortable.

"I look horrid, I am sure," he chuckled, looking down at himself, then back at me. "I am going to get ready in the other room. I hurried the last time I changed and forgot about my pants. I will have food sent to you, I had one of the crew members catch some fish. I had the cook leave one raw for you."

"Really? Fish?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, you asked for fish, did you not?" he asked as he started walking to his closet; then he paused and turned back around.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Oh, and we have arrived. We are anchored.”

“We have?”

“Pixie Isle is just out that window,” he said, motioning to the window behind his desk; then he walked from the room, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Thirty-One

Dominick

"You are not going anywhere till I say so, do you understand?" I told Peter as I watched him stroll over near the rail of the ship, staring at the island before us.

"I have to go. I have to find her."

"Because you love her?" I turned to see William, the old captain, laugh. He saw my glare and quickly put his hands up. "I have no desire to take over the ship; it was too heavy a burden, anyway."

"You better not," I threatened.

He nodded.

I was satisfied.

"You sound just like my mother," Peter groaned, turning to William. Something pierced my heart, hearing a reference to "Mother."

She has a relationship with Peter–not with me.

"Well, she may be onto something. We can all see it, except for *you*," William said with a chuckle.

“Gwendolyn is my best friend, Will. I have to save her,” Peter said, rather determined, looking upon Pixie Isle as if it were all the hope he had left. It was written all over his face, how deeply he felt for that *Gwendolyn* person.

“You really think she is here?” I asked, stepping up beside Peter.

“I’ve looked everywhere else. This makes the most sense. We were looking into pixies, together, before she went missing.”

“Or, perhaps, she ran away to another kingdom to get away from her betrothal,” William said with a loud thwack against Peter's back.

“Betrothal?” he looked at William in surprise.

“She was betrothed to Sir Anthony, just before she disappeared. You really did not know? I thought you were not talking about it because you were ignoring it or something.”

“Sir Anthony, that bore?!” he said with irritation. “Perhaps, she did run away. I do not know how I missed that.”

“She did not tell anyone. I only know because her brother, Michael, told me before we left. Most likely, she fled the kingdom.”

“Whether she left of her own will or not, irregardless, pixies make the most sense.”

“Truly, it seems very unlikely,” William said. “But, I am here till the end, whatever end that may be.”

“Do not sound so hopeless,” Peter grunted.

“You should tell the crew that you will take with you onto the Isle what you know about these pixies,” I said, pulling William’s and Peter’s attention back to me.

They both nodded.

“They are harmless, really–”

“Unless they kidnap the maiden you love?” I asked.

“Who said anything about love?” Peter asked, looking at me, then over to William who was covering his laugh with his hand. He was very unsuccessful.

“Mooning after her, eh?” I asked with a shrug and a smirk.

“She is my best friend.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” William said with his hand over his mouth, still trying to hold back laughter. Peter gave him a dark look, and he only laughed harder, bending over.

“Some friend you are,” Peter mumbled. “Anyway, well, they *are* known for kidnapping, but we are already in their lagoon. I doubt they will kidnap

people who are already here–counterproductive."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"They have this pixie dust stuff, and I hear it has magical properties. They make it by crushing up stars."

"*Stars?* Like in the sky?" William asked, the curiosity sobering his laughter for the moment. It was clear that they had not spoken much about their endeavor.

"That is all I know; I do not know any more," Peter shrugged. "Oh, and obviously, they are a bit mischievous–as is their nature, although it is said that they have good intentions. From their perspective, they believe they are helping their victims."

"What does *that* mean?" I asked.

"Well, they are a bit dim, but they want to help people, so maybe they were drawn to her because of her unwanted betrothal, and maybe *they* thought taking her away from it would help her–" Peter trailed off. "The legends say that they intend to help, but they usually just get it wrong; they misread the situations they observe.

Peter may not have believed he was a man in love, but it was clear as a clear blue sky that he cared for that maiden deeply.

"Okay," I said in annoyance. Those pixies seemed horrid. I did not need to deal with those troublesome magical creatures. I needed to move on past that island; there was nothing there that I was looking for. But I would let Peter complete his search.

You are so weak. Veeto's words echoed in my head. It had been a while since I thought of *him*. I quickly shoved those thoughts away.

I am not weak. I just do not do things the way you do.

"We need most of the crew to stay aboard the ship. Tell the others what you know about these pixies, about how they really just deranged kidnappers." I paused, looking over the crew that I was responsible for. "I do not need the crew being tricked by them. After you brief them thoroughly, we will assemble a group, and we will go and search the isle," I said.

"I thought I was choosing the group?" Peter asked.

"I am not sure I trust your judgment," I said with a smirk as I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Alright," Peter said with a sigh as he shoved William in front of him, and they walked across the deck.

I watched him as he walked away. It was still odd to have my brother there with me–something I never would have expected.

"Nick," Sands came from my left, clearing his throat.

"Yes?" I asked.

"It looks like the waters are rather deep all the way around the isle. There are no beaches, at least not on this side. If they want to go onto the island, they will have to climb up the sides of the rocky cliffs."

I looked out at the island, squinting my eyes as best I could to make out the other side, opposite from where we were.

"Well, we need to travel the entire coast to make sure. It does look like cliffs over there, too," I pointed out, "but let's make sure."

"I will let the crew know," Sands said, then he hurried off. I walked to the port side of the ship, my hands pressed against the railing. The idea of exploring something new always excited me, but for some reason, having Peter and also Meria with me, that excitement was not the same. I felt responsible for them both. *If anything happens to them*–I gulped and closed my eyes, trying to let the sea breeze calm and soothe me. I couldn't decide which was better, having Meria with us as we went into the unknown, or her staying on the ship without me to look after her. Both held risks. Overall, I felt like if she were with me, at least, I could do all in my power to protect her. I looked down at my hand and arm, which she had healed. Most likely, she would sacrifice herself again in order to save someone. I did not wish to control her, but she was so naive to the ways of humans, and she was so sweet, innocent, and kind. I had such a fiery passion to protect her from anything that would leave her with scars.

"I gave the crew all the information about the pixies," Peter said, moving up beside me, and I was startled by his sudden appearance.

How long have I been standing here in thought? I wondered.

I looked out and noticed that we had, indeed, arrived at a stretch of beach where we could safely land for Peter's rescue mission.

"Good. Now, Meria, Sands, myself, William, and Richard will accompany you," I said.

"I am surprised that you will bring Meria."

"She knows of magic, and I can better protect her if I am with her."

"Sounds like you have feelings for her."

"Don't be a fool. I have no feelings in all my being warm enough for that–only room for pain in my heart."

“So you say–and yet–”

“Enough,” I snapped.

“See how it feels, *big brother*, to be teased?” Peter said mockingly.

“Fine, I shall stop if you do. A truce?” I held out my gloved hand.

Peter shook it and smiled wide.

“Now, to find Gwendolyn. She will be really interested to meet you,”

Before I could say anything, he’d turned and walked away with determination in his gait. It was so interesting, the easy way we had begun to converse after he was released from the cell. Why was it so easy to speak with him? Tease him? It was as easy as pestering Sands. Hope rose inside of me that I could have a relationship with the brother I had lost when I was forced aboard Veeto’s ship. I was going to get revenge on my mother, and I knew that no relationship could ever exist between her and me, not only because I wanted nothing to do with her, but because she felt the same way about me. But even with that, maybe, I could have my brother in my life–even if just a little.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Meria

There was a knock at the door, just as I finished my breakfast. The fish was a thousand times better than their horrid porridge, and I was becoming more tolerant of dry, air-drenched fish–although only if uncooked.

"Come in," I called, and I saw Dominick standing there with something in his hands.

"You should not say that. When someone knocks, you should ask who it is. For safety reasons, I do not want anyone in here if you do not wish them to enter," he said, walking to where I sat, behind his desk. He had a small smile on his face, his eyes brighter than usual. He seemed content–even happy. It made me smile. Perhaps, he was not in as much pain.

Did my tears help him? How could I help him even more? Until I had taken away all of the pain he held inside of his veins, I would find ways to continue healing him.

"What is this?" he asked, looking down at his clean desk.

“I cleaned it,” I said, trying to sound more confident with the choice I’d made, even if he did not agree with it.

“But, I knew where everything was,” he said, moving his brown hair from his eyes.

“Well, I placed it all in the drawers. It seemed you were making little use of them, and they will help keep your things from constantly falling off your desk. There was so much all over the floor.”

“As this is a stolen ship, most of this is not mine–” he trailed off as he touched the side of the desk.

“Well, regardless, you are using it,” I said.

“I took most of these out of the drawers because they were not mine, and I did not know where things I wanted were kept,” he said.

“Oh–”

“It is fine,” he said with his tight shoulders dropping within an exhale.

I quickly continued on. “If you need something and cannot find it, I will tell you where it is. I have a good memory,” I said with a smile.

“Is this a mermaid thing? Organizing?” he asked, looking up at me with a small upturn of his lip on the right side. Did that mean he was not upset with me?

“No–that is a *me* thing. You should see my shell collection. I have them all sorted by color and size. Drives my cousin crazy.”

“You collect shells?” he asked, his eyes darting around the desk, but his body was still, as if trying to appear nonchalant, but I could see his interest, and I smiled.

“Yes, I used to do it all the time. Well, I did collect them more before I had to entertain my betrothed. It has been less frequent over the past two moon cycles,” I said.

He nodded, cleared his throat, and lifted his hand up. I then realized he was carrying a sack.

“I brought you new clothing. It's still men's clothing, but it will better protect you while on the isle.”

“I can go?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, if you wish, or you can stay here with the rest of the crew,” he said, setting the sack on the cleaned desk.

“Yes! I mean, *yes*, I wish,” I said with excitement.

“I don’t believe my sister is on this island. I think she is *across* the Mirror Sea. But Peter, as I am sure you know, is looking for his friend.”

“Yes, he told me about her. It seems that his theory is that his friend, Gwendolyn, was stolen by misguided pixies and brought here. So dreadful,” I said. I knew very little about pixies, but they sounded horrid.

“Yes, so we must be careful of them if we run into one on the island,” he said.

I nodded. “Of course, yes.”

He pointed to the sack and cleared his throat, his cheeks darkening in a rather adorable way. I never would have thought ‘adorable’ could have been used to describe the strong and rough Dominick, but it fit him right then. “Are you certain that you can put these on in a way that they cover your body? Or would you like my help?”

“Last time you gave me new clothes, I think I did a good job–much better than I did when we were on Marren Island,” I laughed.

“Yes, true,” he said faintly and looked in front of him. “It seems like forever ago when we were on Marren in that cave. I have never slept so well as I did then,” he whispered that last part, and I felt my mouth turn upward.

I felt the same way.

“Me, too–I miss that time, before you had to *act* like a pirate,” I said with a laugh.

“I told you, or rather, I *warned* you, that I was not a good man, that I was a wicked pirate,” he said with a wink and a smirk that made me want to throw my arms around him and never let him look at anyone else that way.

“You are a good man, Dominick. You are rough, strong, and fierce, but also kind and thoughtful.”

“If anyone heard such talk of The Cruel Hand–”

“Do you still want to be him? The Cruel Hand?”

“No–but–”

“But?”

“That is all I know. It commands respect and fear, so that I will have a crew who will work for me.”

“You know, Prince Peter’s crew *respects* him.”

“He is their ruler; they have to or will be thrown into prison. I have no such power over a crew. When I took over this ship, it was my reputation as The Cruel Hand that kept this crew in line.”

“No, Peter was the reason they have not fought you, why they did not release him and Captain Willaim,” I said. I figured he had not truly known

how much Peter had done to try and placate his crew so that he could get closer to his brother. I had asked Peter over and over again if I could help him–even in the earlier days aboard the ship before Dominick had released him–even though it went against Dominick. Peter told me over and over again, to Captain William's annoyance, that he was going to give Dominick time, and that he did not want to act rash. He even went as far as to say he appreciated the break from being the perfect prince as he leaned his back against the wall of the tiny cell underneath the ship's deck, where he had been placed.

"Peter?" Dominick asked.

"Everyone from his crew attempted to release him and Captain William. He ordered them to obey you, telling them he 'needed a break.'"

"Why would he do that?" Dominick's brow creased with confusion.

"You are his brother. He wants to know you, not fight you."

"I never wanted to hurt him, but I have a plan," he said with determination.

"I know. But, you are a good man," I said and watched as his rigid shoulders relaxed as he let out another long breath.

"It is so strange seeing him again. I want a relationship with him, but I'm not sure I can." He looked down to his hands–his gloved hands–cursed hands, hands that I so badly wanted to heal for him.

"He wants that, too, Dominick. What happened to you? How did you get so separated from him and from your family?"

There was a long silence. Dominick did not look at me, but I waited. I waited, hoping he would explain.

"My mother, she sent me away when I was a lad, sent me off with my Uncle Veeto and the Crimson Blade. It was horrible. He locked me up without food or drink unless I did as he asked. He would force me to torture people, over and over again. So many times, I begged the Ancients to just kill me, but I still woke up each and every single morning. I was near to tossing myself overboard for the sharks, when Sands came aboard the Crimson Blade. He gave me hope for a goal and a future, away from Veeto."

"Dominick," I said, a tear dripping down my cheek. I walked to him from behind the desk. Slowly, I touched his face, and he looked into my eyes. His eyes made me tremble. So much pain and sorrow locked inside of them. I

wanted to obliterate it all. He would not know if I tried a little to help him. I wiped at my cheek, then quickly pressed my tear to his cheek.

Heal, I sang within my soul's melody, reaching out with all my power. I wanted to probe into him and search for his soul's melody, find it, hear it, and connect to him and to who he truly was. But I knew humans had not used souls' melodies for hundreds of years. I thought I heard a slight hum inside of him, but I was distracted when he took his gloved hand and pressed it to my hand, there on his cheek, locking me there. His head moved down closer to mine. His body moved closer as he took a few steps, our bodies only an inch apart.

I then heard the hum inside of him again–a piece of his soul's melody, clearly trying to reach out to mine. He did have a melody. That brought me hope and reassurance; Dominick was good. He may have been made to do bad things, but his soul was good. I looked up at Dominick, and I began to caress his cheek. His hand was still pressed against mine but not enough to restrict my movements.

How much you have endured.
How much you have gone through,

I sang with my melody and with my voice.

I traced the scar on his cheek, that one symbol of his pain that made him appear even more

fierce and uniquely himself. He sucked in a breath as I gently touched the marred skin.

"What is this from? Will you ever tell me?" I whispered.

He closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath.

"I can't, Meria, not yet. I need–" he said deeply with a grit to his voice that shook me to my core. He closed his eyes and bent his head down.

I tugged his face in front of mine and caressed his jaw, his cheeks, and every inch of that handsome face until he finally opened his eyes. I quivered as I realized those stormy eyes, beautiful, dark, fathomless eyes, held even more pain than I had ever seen before. I did not want to remind him of something so painful.

"You do not have to tell me. Take all the time you need," I said.

He nodded. "Thank you. I want to–"

“It’s okay, I promise. I will be here when you are ready,” I smiled. “But, Dominick, I want to help you with your pain. I can help take it away,” I said, caressing his cheek, wanting to tell him about my tears and how they could accentuate my touch, about my ability to remove his curse.

“No,” he said, taking a step back and breaking the vulnerable bubble between us. His walls were up again. “Don't ever try to take it away; I can handle it. I have for my entire life.”

“No, I do not agree with you,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

“This argument will never end, will it?”

“Yes, I can help you, and I care about you.”

“I care about you, too, which is why I would never let you take on my pain to give me relief.”

“That is not how it works. I feel no pain when I use my magic.”

“Have you ever tried to heal someone like me? Someone cursed? Who knows what would happen? What if you healed me, and then the curse fell upon you? No. Absolutely not, Meria,” he said, shaking his head quickly. His voice was getting louder with determination, and with that fear, I saw a flickering in his eyes.

“That wouldn’t happen.” Although I said it, I had no idea, really. I doubted Ancient Draken would allow such a thing to happen to a magical being; still, the Ancients had abandoned us to the sea, and they also neglected our flickering lights. Who knows what Draken thinks of us.

“Meria, please. I already have a hard time living with myself and the way I have lived most of my life. I cannot add *you* to the list of people I have done wrong.”

“I can’t say I will never help you, but I will drop it for now. However, I would like to discuss it again.” He had to be okay with that because the feelings I had for him would not let me do nothing when he was in constant pain, and when I could do something about it.

“I will not change my mind. I may be many things, and I may have hurt many people, but I am not going to hurt *you*.” He stepped away from the desk and toward the door. “I will leave you to get dressed. We will leave soon.”

“Dominick?” I asked as he placed his gloved hand on the handle. He turned to look at me.

“I am sorry for your curse. You do not deserve it in the slightest.”

“Thank you, but I do deserve it more than you’ll ever know.”

Before I could say anything else, he was out the door.

My clothing was easier to put on than it was before. There was a small mirror on the inside door of the closet, and as I finished dressing, I took a look at myself and straightened my shirt and vest, making sure they were on correctly. I knew how it was to appear from observing the crew's dress. The clothing fit me rather snugly. I was surprised. The outfit I had worn before was so large that it was hard to move in it. Even the boots were a size or two too large. The pants were too long as well as the sleeves of the shirt, and I realized I was rather short for a human. Perhaps, human females were shorter than males, though. I had yet to meet a female human, so I was not sure. But the men aboard were all taller than me.

The only thing I disliked was my hair. It was always wild. I still had the comb that Dominick had given to me on Marren, and I attempted to tame it a few times, but it never looked as it had when Dominick had fixed it before. In the ocean, my hair was never a problem. It floated about me, and I brushed it out, but being dry, I had no idea how to do it. I found a ribbon at the bottom of the cabinet and tried to tie my long hair back.

When there was another knock on the door, instead of granting entrance, I called out: "Who is it?"

"It's me," Dominick said from the other side of the door.

"Come in!" I called. There was a noise, like the handle was being turned, and then it stopped.

"Are you dressed? As in *fully* dressed? Like you have the shirt on correctly, and your legs are in the pants? The only skin showing should–" He stopped talking as I opened the door and smirked at him with one hand on my hip.

"I think I've figured out human clothing."

I'd spent the last twenty or so minutes before he knocked, making sure I had put on the clothes correctly. Although the thought did cross my mind more than once that it was a shame to do so, because the darkening of

Dominick's cheeks and his eyes darting this way and that when I did not wear human clothes correctly, was one of my favorite looks on him.

But alas, I put them on correctly, hoping to impress him.

He looked me up and down, silently, then cleared his throat. When his eyes met mine, I saw relief there. I smiled, holding back a giggle. What did he see in my eyes when he looked at me then? He seemed to hold my gaze like he was holding onto me, forever, anchoring me to him.

I would not have minded such a thing in the slightest.

"Well done," he nodded, as he cleared his throat. He then looked at my hair, which I knew was ridiculous. I had given up on my hair; no matter how much I brushed it, the wind always tangled it up again.

"Let me help you with your hair," he smiled; then he came inside, closing the door behind him. He motioned for me to sit in his chair, and he came around to stand behind me.

"I hate this hair. It does not do well out of the ocean. Perhaps I should cut it off?" I asked as he began to untie the ribbon.

"I beg of you to *not* cut it. Something so unique and beautiful should not be lost."

I liked having my hair long. All mermaids had long hair, and we treasured it. I would not feel like myself without it.

"No, I do not wish to cut it, but it irritates me."

He walked closer to me, and I breathed in sharply with surprise when he began to touch my hair, twisting it in his fingers.

"Is this okay?" he asked in a whisper.

I nodded, and he stepped away. I wondered what he was doing until I noticed he was pulling out a comb from his pocket. He smiled at me and stepped around, standing behind me.

I tried to compose myself as he lightly combed out the tangles with his comb, gently gathering my hair into sections as he quietly worked, tickling my neck every so often with the brush of his fingers. I closed my eyes, enjoying every single moment. I could have stayed there forever.

"There–is that alright?" he asked after a few minutes. His hands were no longer in my hair.

I reached up to touch my hair, which was all gathered together.

"I only know the braid we use for making ropes," he said, moving from behind me to look at me directly. I could feel his eyes on me, but I did not meet them with my own. I felt the top of my hair and trailed the grooves

down until I reached the end. I rested the braid over my shoulder and looked down at the way he had braided it. It did, indeed, look like the weave of the rope I'd seen on the ship. I smiled; it was pretty. I walked over to the small mirror on the closet to see it even better.

I looked different, older–stronger. I had never seen myself that way. I smiled wide at the pretty way the pink and blond strands twisted together.

"This is–Dominick! I love it! You have such skill."

"I assure you, I am not good at it, but I hope it will suffice. Sorry, I do not have another lady here to help you more."

"I enjoyed it. I mean, your hands felt good on my head." I felt my cheeks darken.

Dominick smiled and walked over to stand behind me.

"I am glad to help. I have never seen such beautiful hair before,"

I watched both of our reflections in the mirror. He was so handsome. His features were so dark, where mine were light. A beautiful contrast. It was possible that I was growing more and more attached to that human. My heart was bursting with feelings for him, and my soul was constantly reaching out to sing a melody with him.

"We are ready to go," his deep voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I turned around to face him and nodded, "okay."

I looked at his lips. Edmar's lips were a disappointment, but I couldn't stop wondering, over and over, how it might feel to kiss Dominick's lips. I had a strong feeling it would feel completely different. Everything with him was different.

"Are you ready for an adventure?" he asked, his eyebrows moving up and down with that playful smirk he sometimes gave me. I laughed and touched his shoulder. His warmth was so addictive.

"I have been on an adventure ever since saving you. I would go on a thousand million adventures with you."

"A thousand million, huh?" he questioned and motioned for the door.

"Or more, endless really," I shrugged.

"Sounds like you like me a bit," he said with a teasing smile.

"A bit, yes."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Dominick

Once our feet stepped onto the sand, something felt different. I turned to look at Peter and then Meria who were on either side of me. They merely looked about. As we reached the dense jungle, there was a thickness, also, to the air–as if it pressed upon us, holding us, waiting to alert the island of our presence. To say I was apprehensive would have been an understatement. I was still trying to wrap my head around the information Meria had told me about Peter. *How could he be so kind when I had been so mean to him? Does he want a relationship? Want us to be friends–brothers again?*

"It is so thick–the air here," Meria said, coming up beside me, moving me from my confused thoughts and ever confused feelings about my brother, back to her and the confused thoughts and feelings that she gave me.

It seemed I would never escape them. I just wanted–

What do I want?

I was free of Veeto; I had a ship; I did want to save my sister, but I was starting to wonder if I needed to save her for the same reasons as before.

There used to be a piercing pain in my heart whenever I thought about Peter and my mother, a pain more acute than all the others. It had, somehow, become less sharp, less painful, and more like a bruise or an ache. I looked down at Meria. She was so beautiful, standing there in men's clothing, her hair tied back by that braid. I would gladly have braided her hair every single day; it was incredibly pleasant. For during the time that I was braiding her hair, the pain within me disappeared–just like it always did whenever I was near her or touched her. I still wondered how that could be, but it had to be because she was a mermaid. Nothing else made sense.

"I like it much better than the dry air, but it makes me want to swim," she whispered even closer to me. I pictured her beautiful turquoise tail. It was a similar shade to some of the warmer waters I had traveled. She was beautiful–remarkable.

"It is thicker–" I trailed off as Peter called from ahead.

"She's here!" he shouted, and all of us started running to meet up with him. He was bending over something that was on the muddy ground. Picking it up, he wiped it off with the front of his white shirt and held it up.

"This is one of her books," Peter said with enthusiasm.

"Anyone could have that book–" I began but stopped myself as I looked into Peter's eyes, once filled with bright hope, then growing dim from my words.

"Let's keep looking," I said with a grunt as Peter stuck the book in the bag at his side.

We walked for a while, and I wasn't sure we would find anything more. Was it possible that she was there, but that she had died? That dark thought was unwelcomed, but I couldn't help but wonder if that had, possibly, happened. I would not voice that thought to Peter. I bit my lip as we continued to walk.

We reached a meadow of tall grasses and flowers, swaying in a gentle breeze.

"How beautiful! I had no idea the colors from the reefs could be found on land!" Meria said, bending down and touching a blue flower. Her smile was distracting for a few heartbeats. I placed one hand on her shoulder, taking her hand with my other one to pull her back up. She had been putting her face into the flowers to smell them after Peter had called back that they smelled wonderful. Meria looked at me, and at my hand.

“We don’t know what is safe and what isn’t. Sometimes, beauty is dangerous,” I said.

Meria placed her free hand on my shoulder and nodded.

“They are so pretty,” she said.

“They are called flowers.”

“Flowers–how lovely,” she whispered. I looked around the group at the open space. There was something about it that made me apprehensive. Peter stepped into the grove a few feet away from the group, and with each step, golden dust floated up into the air until thousands of glowing orbs lit up the sky. We all stepped back into the jungle, but it was too late. Whatever was happening, there was nothing we could do to stop it–good or bad.

Peter kept walking.

“I am looking for Gwendolyn Darling. Is she here?” There were sounds all around us, like that of small tinkling bells.

A small orb floated right before Peter’s face, and he reached out his hand as if to touch it.

“Peter!” I began, but it was too late. I watched in horror as all the glowing orbs swarmed him. I ran to him, trying to push the orbs off of his body.

“Stop, Dom–Please, this is my chance to find her,” he said, pleading. His eyes were fierce and determined. My heart sank. I could not tell him what to do. I may have been his blood, but I hadn’t seen him since we were children. I had no place in his life to tell him what to do.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

“Can you hear them? They are going to bring me to Gwendolyn,” he said in his carefree way. It was as if it was merely some game.

“Remember what you told me about them? Can you really trust them?”

“They mean well, and they want us together. Let me go. I will stay here, and on your way back from your task, return and pick us up. I should have Gwendolyn by then.” He seemed so confident, happy, and sure.

“But–” I wanted to say so much, but I couldn’t. I could not say the things out loud I was thinking: that I had just gotten him back, and I needed him not to die before I had a chance to explain myself and try to make peace with him so that we could truly be brothers.

“Please, trust me, Dom,” he pleaded. I saw that little child again, the boy who had taken my hand when we had walked along the seashore in Walden, the little boy who had followed me around and who I cared about and missed during all those years we had been apart.

I looked at the orbs, which were floating beside me as if waiting.

"If you hurt my brother, I shall come back here and annihilate all of you. You know of the Traitor King? He is nothing compared to me. I am The Cruel Hand, and if you hurt him–"

There were more bell sounds, but within them, I could hear the words: *"We know who you are! The Hand–the Healer–the Stolen Prince!"*

Stolen Prince? More like a banished and exiled prince.

"Do not threaten them!" Peter said with clenched teeth.

"Safe, safe, safe," I heard their voices in the tinkling of the bells. "Safe, the young prince will be safe."

"Did you hear that?" Peter asked, reaching out his hand again, ready for them to take him to Gwendolyn.

"Yes, I did," I grunted.

"You know, I never stopped loving you, Dom. I knew I would find you someday. I still have a thousand questions to ask you about why you left us, but I will save that conversation until after you return for me, alright?"

"I did not *leave*–"

"Alright? I will be back," he said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Okay, good. Yes. We can talk when I come back to pick you and Gwendolyn up."

He smiled wide and nodded. "See you in a few days," he said, turning, and then as if he were in control of the pixies, they swarmed him again. I stepped back, and in a few moments, Peter was in the air, being carried away. I could still make out his small body up high in the air when Sands came to stand beside me at the edge of the small meadow.

"Remarkable–" Sands said.

"It is utterly horrifying. What if he falls?" I asked, worry coursing through me. Meria placed her hand on mine, and I turned to look down at her on my other side.

"But Dominick, he is flying," she said, pointing to the sky. He was, indeed, flying. I smiled for a moment, then turned away.

"He won't fall," Sands said, patting me on the shoulder.

"Well, we must get back to the ship. The sooner we find the Mirror Sea, the sooner we can come back for Peter," I said.

"I hope he finds Gwendolyn, and that she is well," Meria said.

"I threatened the pixies; they will be fine," I said, feigning confidence.

“Sounds like you. I wouldn't expect anything different, but the ‘Traitor King,’ really?” she laughed as we both turned around and started walking through the jungle after Sands.

“I like to be consistent, and all magical beings fear him,” I said, squeezing her hand, which was still within mine. Until she let go, I would keep holding on.

“There is magic in the air here. This island is dripping with it,” she said. “Can’t you feel it? The water is also filled with magic, and that must be because of all the pixies that occupy this isle.”

“Is that why the air is so different?” I asked.

“It is possible.” We walked back through the jungle, happily, with no other run-ins with pixies or other magical creatures. Once I was back aboard my ship, I took a deep breath.

“Sands, we must set sail. We have to be back here in no less than four days,” I ordered.

“Aye, captain!” Sands said with dramatics; then he moved about the deck to command the crew.

I needed a minute alone. I did not want any eyes on me, so I walked quickly to my cabin. I had no idea that Meria had followed after me until I went to close my door, and there she stood in the doorway.

“Are you alright?” she asked me with that sweet look of concern on her face, a small crease on her forehead, showing her worry.

“Yes–of course.”

“Peter will come back. There is more to both of your stories. They are intertwined, I am sure of it.”

“I am not worried about Peter. He is a grown man and can do as he wishes,” I said gruffly.

“Dominick, I know you. I can tell you care about him. That would not be wrong, you know. He is your brother.”

“Meria–”

“I will leave you, but I just want you to know that you do not need to hide your emotions or your feelings.”

“I don’t have emotions or feelings; I am fine. It is just another day being a pirate.”

“Are you really going to lie to me? Remember in that cave? You told me on Marren Island that you still thought about your brother.”

“Fine, I am worried about him, alright? Happy?” I said harshly.

She smiled wide.

"Yes, I just wanted you to admit it. You are not as cruel and unfeeling as you pretend to be."

"You do not know me, fully, Meria. I have lived a life that would scar you forever," I said, stepping closer to her. I took her chin in my hand, and although I wore my gloves, her heat pierced through me.

"I would not mind a few scars, if it meant I could come closer to you," she said tenderly, looking from my scar, to my eyes.

"I am not like your betrothed merman. I do not follow all the rules, and I do not–"

"You also do not report to my father every single step I make, nor do you betray me and get me banished, nor do you make me believe you want a life together and a family and then rip it all away."

I blinked, dumbfounded, and then I was angry at what a fool that merman was. I already disliked him on principal, but hearing that–

"I will kill him, torture him to death–"

"No, you will not."

"I will inflict him with so much pain that he will beg your forgiveness," I snapped.

"No, you will not."

"Yes, I will," I said, taking her shoulders in my hands. "And I will enjoy it."

"You do not scare me," she whispered with a smile. "But nice try, my *wicked* pirate." She then brushed her hand across my scar again, and I turned my face, frustrated; she could see so much within me, and I was afraid of what that meant.

"You are not at all like Edmar. Which is what I like about you, Dominick. You are not perfect, but I do not want perfection, nor what my father believes is perfection for me."

"You should not want anything to do with me."

"But I do. I cannot help it."

I grazed my thumb over her lip, wanting more than anything else in this world to lean down and kiss those perfectly inviting lips.

"Meria, I am–"

"What?"

"I am tired."

“Are you sure?” she asked, stepping closer to me. Her hand, then on my chest, played with the buttons on my vest.

I nodded, *yes*.

“Say it. Tell me you want me to leave, Dominick,” she whispered, and I stopped my thumb’s movement upon her soft lips.

“Do not ask me to do the impossible,” I said, leaning my face closer, down, until my nose touched hers. “I am a man, a wicked–”

“Pirate, I know. I like pirates,” she sighed as I pressed my lips to the side of her mouth–not touching her lips. I trailed my lips over her cheek and stopped when she wrapped her arms around my neck, her fingers playing with my hair. I closed my eyes and took in the feeling of her all around me. I did not want that moment to end. I wanted to take everything I desired from her, and be who I always claimed to be: cruel, selfish, and wicked. But I could not. She had discovered my bluff. She saw through the facade. I could not act the part, not in full, not with her. My eyes felt heavy, along with my body.

“Meria–I need you to leave,” I said again and took a step back, reluctantly. I should not have pressed my lips against her soft flesh because I knew I would not be able to focus on anything else from that moment on, but the desire I had to kiss her, in truth–to have those lips pressed against mine, was intense. But for some reason, a reason I did not understand, I could not do it. I could not kiss her. Why? Something held me back.

“Okay, I will see you later then,” Meria said, taking a few steps back. I was frozen in that spot, my hand still in mid-air as she backed away from me. “Thank you.”

“Thank *me?* For what?” I asked.

“For this. For opening up to me. I appreciate it.”

“I did not–What are you talking about?” I was extremely confused. I had not opened up at all. I had told her hardly anything, and I pushed her away when all I wanted to do was kiss her.

“You say things, Dominick, with your actions.” Then before I could ask her what she meant, she was gone with the door closed behind her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Meria

He was in pain. I could see it all over his face. And, yes, I knew that he was constantly in some sort of pain, but that pain felt different. He loved his brother. That was clear, but he was so worried about him. I had a sense that Peter would be fine. Pixies, although mischievous and childish, were not truly wicked. They meant well, and from what I heard in the chimes, they expected Peter to come to their isle. They expected him to go after his *love*. Peter may not have understood that he loved Gwendolyn, but everyone else could see it.

I touched my cheek as I walked to the railing of the ship, watching the water below us splash against the hull. My heart was so light; I felt like I was floating. Dominick's lips had pressed against my cheek–so close to my lips. I realized as I touched my face where his lips had been that I wanted him to kiss me, to truly and fully press his mouth against mine. I was sure that it would be life-changing. As terrifying as that was, and even with how unsure I was of what a life with a pirate would be, I still wanted it. I still

wanted Dominick, even though I did not know how it could work between us.

Us. I smiled. The sound of '*us'* made my heart flip. What I wouldn't give to wake up beside Dominick every single day. I could see him in my mind, being a father, holding a child in his arms and with a smile, grunting as our child touched his face; I wanted that. I had never pictured Edmar in such a way. Every single daydream about my life after marriage included the babies I would have, care for, and love–a family of my own. Edmar had never been interested in that and never found his way into my dreams. Sure, he would have been needed to father my children, and in my imaginings, some of the merchildren I had imagined did have his red tail. But in my thoughts about a life with Dominick, it was clear that I could see us sailing the seas. I could see him teaching me all about sailing. We could raise our family on a ship *and* in the sea. I could see a barefooted little boy, running around the deck with Dominick's brown hair and blue eyes.

I clutched the side of the boat. I wanted that. I wanted that life so badly. I shook my head and moved my hand from my face. Dominick had a hard time opening up. I did not blame him for that. He had gone through much in his life, and I did not know all of it.

I still needed to find my mother in Walden. That voyage would not be our only adventure together. I took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly as I watched Pixie Isle shrink away in the distance. I forced my thoughts away from Dominick. How were my people? I missed my nieces and my nephews and my sisters, even though the latter could be rather irritating. Would Finn be waiting for me when we returned from the Misted Seas? I wished he was with me. I missed Finn possibly the most. I told myself that once I found my mother, once I found out the truth about Marren, I could save my people and return home. Sure, I wanted to go home because I loved the sea and my people and my family, especially Finn, but I didn't have the same all encompassing desire that I had before my journey with Dominick. I watched the crew work, and I wondered if I would be satisfied never again returning to the sea. Sure, land, it was dry, and humans were strange, but I was growing used to my legs, and even though Dominick was closed off more than I liked, I wanted his company as long as he would give it to me. I looked off into the distance, and Pixie Isle was gone, and a darkness crept over, not only the sky, but the water–it was so dark, almost black.

Then there was a slight shift in the magical feelings within the sea; it soon sounded like there was thunder beneath the ship, shaking the boat. I turned around, and the crew were all standing there, frozen.

Dominick burst from his room, his hair handsomely disheveled. “These are sea serpent infested seas, here, just before the Mirror Sea. The serpents hunt in large schools and can gnaw holes into the hull of the ship. We must hurry through these waters!” Dominick shouted. I looked into the water and saw that it was already full of small green-gray tails–*serpents?* Sea serpents had been extinct since before the Great War, I thought. Sea serpents ruined everything in their path, eating whatever they came in contact with. They used to eat the reefs and had destroyed so many miles of seaways. They would sink us all. While I would be fine, the men aboard would not be.

There were loud scrapes and crunching, like breaking wood. I looked down again, seeing the serpents latching on by their teeth, trying to get into the hull. I began to sing within my soul:

Creatures of the sea–
Calm–calm–
Shift with the waves–
Float away–Float away.

I urged them to leave the ship alone, wondering if my song would be effective from the ship’s deck. I tried to shift the current, moving my hands back and forth to cause the waves to move the creatures away from the ship. I repeated the song for a fifth time, and the sounds of the wood breaking lessened. The ship, which had vibrated with intense pressure, quieted. They were still swarming around the ship, and I was certain that the ship was going to take on water because they had already done damage, but hopefully, we would make it out of those waters.

I continued to sing. Their heads were, then, out of the water, and I was shocked by the hundreds of sea serpents that I saw, their heads bobbing to my song, the sea rocking them back and forth and away from the ship.

Float away–
Float away creatures of Mother Sea–
Float away,
away from me.

I watched as the swarm of sea snakes slithered slowly away. I clutched the side of the railing as I realized how weak I had become from using my magical song.

"Meria!" I turned to see Dominick, his hair tousled in the wind and his dark blue eyes locked onto mine. He rushed to my side and held me in his arms. I was pressed against his chest, and his warmth made me feel better–not as drained. "What did you do? Are you hurting? What happened?"

"I am fine."

"What did you do?" I was shocked when he touched my cheeks, turning my head this way and that as if inspecting me to ensure that everything was in its place.

"I just did my job. I am your mermaid, afterall," I said, feeling both more exhausted in his embrace as well as more energized. How that was possible, I did not understand.

"Meria–" he reprimanded. "We were taking care of it down below."

"We were all going to die. There was nothing you or your crew could have done to stop them."

"But–"

"I can persuade with my song. It is something the mer do–"

"Persuade?"

"Yes–it was one of the other reasons humans hunted us. But only sirens use their songs for luring humans. Mermaids only use them for the sea and its inhabitants."

"But you seem so weak again–"

"Yes, but I will be fine, like I always am."

"No pain?" he asked, looking into my eyes, back and forth, impatient for my answer.

"No–I do not fear pain, Dominick, and even if it did cause me pain, I would still help."

"I am glad you are okay. Let me help you back to the cabin so you can rest. Thank you. We all owe you our lives."

"There is a reason that your studies informed you that you need a magical creature of the sea to safely navigate these waters. I do not think the magical creatures of the sea want humans here. I have a feeling that humans have not been in these waters for hundreds of years. The mists have protected these seas."

“Hopefully, we will reach the island soon, accomplish our task, and then be on our way,” Dominick said with a nod. Then he bent down and picked me up, my arms around his neck. and his arms holding my legs. I was cradled so close to him. I never wanted him to put me down. I smiled as he carried me to the captain's cabin. He kicked the slightly ajar door, left open from when he had suddenly emerged to tell us of the sea serpent waters. He walked to the bed and set me down, gently placing my head upon his pillow. He brushed some loose strands of hair from my face, and his hand trailed down the hair of my braid beside my shoulder. I closed my eyes, feeling his touch all over my face, and I laughed.

“Sorry,” he said, pulling away. I opened my eyes.

“I am well, Dominick. I just need to rest a little,” I said.

“If anything ever happened, Meria–”

“If anything happens to me, you would never reach the Mirror Sea, nor would you make your journey home, I know,” I said, knowing that he meant more than that–he had to. But I also knew he was closed off, and wondered if he would agree with my reasoning.

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, looking him over.

“There is much on my mind, but I am fine. I was worried about you–really worried, and it frightened me. You keep doing that.”

“ I am sorry for making you worry.”

“I just need a minute without the crew's eyes on me.”

I reached up to him and touched his arm. He flinched. “What truly happened to you, Dominick?” I whispered.

“It doesn't matter,” he said, his voice rough.

“I think it does. It matters to me.”

He leaned over me, and I moved my hand from his arm, over to his face, tracing his features, just as he had done to me. How I loved every single ridge and freckle, and scar.

“I cannot remember the last time someone touched me–touched my skin,” he whispered.

I moved my hand from his face.

“And it was never like this. Don't stop–unless–you don’t–”

“I want to.” I smiled, and I reached for his hands, which were braced against the bed, so he moved, making them available for me to hold. I slowly pulled the gloves from each of his fingers. I lifted up his hand and

traced the black veins–veins filled with pain. I could feel the magic of his curse pulsing there within his blood. How badly I wanted to take it from him.

He was still stiff as I traced his skin. Still stiff as I placed my palm against his and held our hands in front of his face.

"You will not hurt me, Dominick."

"I could. Just because I have not yet, does not mean it can't happen."

"No–you couldn't," I said, moving his hand so it was touching my cheek. He took in another sharp breath as his warm skin touched mine there. I reached down for his other hand and placed it on my other cheek, his hands cradling my face. At first, when I dropped my hands, I thought he would remove his hands, but we remained there, frozen–for how long, I did not know, but he kept his hands there. There was a slight twitch of his fingers, and then he caressed my skin, pressing his warmth into me. When he did that before, he wore his gloves, and it still made me tingle and feel warmth–*but this is–this is fire–a molten lava flow. More and more intense every time.*

A loud knock came at the door, and we both jumped apart. For some reason, my breath was heavy, and I was having a hard time focusing my thoughts. I missed his touch instantly.

"Nick?" Sand's voice came from behind the not fully closed door.

"Yes?" Dominick nearly growled with an irritation that I felt, too. He turned his gaze from me to the door.

"We have another problem."

Dominick looked at me, as if he were going to say something to me, but he quickly looked back to the door.

"I will be back," he said quickly and left the room, leaving me alone and cold without him.

I awoke to the sounds of boots hitting the floor. I turned to see a stumbling Dominick, walking across the room and over to me.

“Dominick?” I asked, sitting up. He looked in my direction, but it was like he wasn't seeing me; he was merely seeing *through* me.

“Meria–” his voice was like a sweet caress. He had never sounded like that before. “You are still here.”

“Where else would I go?”

“You can swim. You could spell every creature and beat us to the island. Or swim away across the sea where I could never find you again,” he said with a frown.

“I made a promise to help you.”

“Yes–yes you did, didn't you?” he said, walking closer, still stumbling. He held himself up, using a chair. Why was he stumbling as if he had been drinking? Dominick never drank with the crew. A moment later, Sands rushed to his side.

“Can you help me, Meria?” Sands asked when he saw me sitting on the edge of the bed. I nodded and rushed to his side.

“Meria loves to help–to heal. Can you heal my shattered heart, Meria? Can you make me feel more than just pain?” Dominick said, slurring his words.

“What is wrong with him, Sands?”

“We don't know. He was down in the hull of the ship, helping to get the holes patched. A few of the other men are in just the same condition.”

I looked at him again. He was wet from the waist down.

“Take off his pants.”

“Excuse me, Meria?” Sands asked with a chuckle of confusion.

“She wants me, Sands. Who am I to deny her?” Dominick asked.

I gasped.

“She blushes for me, how sweet.”

Sands had Dominick sit as I gathered myself. That was not truly Dominick, but his words made my pulse quicken. Sands pulled off Dominick's boots, stockings, and pants. Of course, he was covered with his under layer, but it was strange to see him so *uncovered*. Sands took in a deep breath as he saw the black veins that covered his legs. He was careful not to touch Dominick’s skin directly–he knew of the curse. Sands stepped back, and I moved to Dominick’s legs, inspecting them. Sure enough, there were over a dozen bite marks.

“What is it?” Sands asked.

“I need rum, clean linens, a hot poker, and a basin of water,” I said.

“I do not drink, Meria–but you are thoughtful, aren't you, my little mermaid?” Dominick said with a saucy grin and a wink.

I felt my cheeks darken.

“What is it?” Sands asked.

“The sea serpents; they bit him.”

“How?”

“Were there any in the hull?”

“A few, but the crew got them.”

“It seems, not before they were bitten.”

Sands turned and walked away. “I will tell the others.”

“Tell them to use the rum to numb the pain–as it will get rather painful.”

“And the hot poker?”

“That is to seal up the wounds.”

There were many poisonous creatures living in the sea, so many of the mer had knowledge of their poisons. The wounds needed to be cleaned and sealed. The rum was something I knew from our journey that helped to ease the pain of so many sailors.

“You are so warm–so soft–so lovely,” Dominick said, his head bobbing to the side.

“You are *very* poisoned.”

“I have been through worse.”

“Have you?” I asked. I didn't want to take advantage of his intoxicated state, but I wanted to know about him, about the secrets he held onto so tightly.

“I have, but you have not; you are pure and good, untouched by the evil and pains of this world.”

“I have had pain,” I said, taking note of each wound. I counted ten in groups of two. The skin about his legs was turning a sickly yellow. I didn't have time to waste.

“I am going to get the poison out.”

I like the poison; it helps the cursed pain–it is nearly gone.”

“I am so sorry, Dominick,” I said as tears dripped from my eyes. He reached down with his gloved hand and wiped at my tears.

“Do not shed tears for me, beautiful,” he whispered in such a sweet voice, I wanted to memorize it.

“I am going to heal you.”

“Okay, but it is a shame–”

“This poison is not real freedom from the pain, Dominick–only temporary.”

He nodded.

I moved my body to sit on the floor. I cried very carefully over the wounds so they were sure to catch my tears. Minute after minute dragged on, but as I reached the final two puncture wounds to heal them, my head started to feel fuzzy again from the effects of my healing.

“Dominick?” I asked, looking into his eyes. He still seemed dazed, his head lulled to the side.

“Yes, beautiful,” he said with a smirk.

“Do you feel better?”

“That is an interesting question because I feel *more* pain, which is normal. I do not feel better, but I feel more like myself if that is what you mean.”

He winked at me. It seemed that some of the poison’s effects were still working.

“I am so sorry, Dominick.”

“No—no sorry, my mermaid. *My* mermaid–”

Tears dripped down my face, and I wanted again, to break his curse.

“Can I put my pants on now?” he asked with another smirk.

“Yes, of course.” I stood up and turned my back to him, hearing him shuffle.

“Thank you for helping me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I am going to check on the others,” he said, and I turned around.

“No–I will go find Sands and make sure they are well.”

“I can go. I feel fine,” he said.

“Just rest, will you?” I snapped.

“Did you just–”

“You will stay here, Dominick, and you will sit in this chair until I return. Do you hear me?” I poked him in the chest until he sat back down in the chair. That was when I saw the smile upon his face. He took my finger that was poking his chest into his hand and tugged me forward–I fell into him, sitting on his lap.

“Dominick!” I squealed. He wrapped his arms around me, and I was engulfed by his embrace. That was the warmest, safest, most cherished I had ever felt in my entire life.

“Thank you for demanding something. We will teach you to use that voice yet.”

I laughed, shoving his chest. “I do not like being mean.”

“Saying what you want–asking others to follow you–that is not mean, Meria,” he said, caressing my cheek. He had his gloves on, and I wished he hadn’t so I could feel his full warmth.

My heart beat erratically as he pressed his forehead against mine, breathed in deeply, and closed his eyes.

“How do you make the pain go away?” he asked, his breath caressing my lips.

“Dominick–” I began.

But he pressed his lips to my forehead, and I lost all sense of reason. His hot lips pressed against my skin made me forget where I was, even what my name was. All I could think about was Dominick.

In the next moment, his hand slacked at his side. His head bent back and rested on the chair.

“I think I’m passing out. What a shame when I desired so much to kiss you and ruin your reputation–”

“My reputation?” I laughed.

“It would be ruined. I would ravish you.”

“Stop it! You would not!”

His head lulled even more to the side, and he blinked up at me, a small smile upon his lips. “I would enjoy every single moment–”

“Dominick, stop. Rest, you wicked pirate,” I laughed, climbing off of his lap.

“Meria?”

I turned around to look at him. He was even more slumped than before.

“Yes?”

“Do not leave me. At least–I mean, come back. Will you, my mermaid?” His voice was so faint–and a little garbled.

“It will just be a few minutes,” I assured him.

“Alright–but I think you've ruined me, just like this poison. If I am going to die from this poison–I would rather die by drowning. Yes, I want to drown by being consumed by you.”

“You are not drowning. I just saved your life,” I said, placing my hands on my hips.

“I used to not think about having a normal life, kissing your sweet, soft lips and having a family–beautiful children with your tail color and my dark eyes. I never thought such things–only thought about being the captain of my own ship. Now, after knowing you and being with you, I want *you* more. I want you more than a life at sea, and more than this ship. I want my mermaid, forever–my Meria.” Then his eyes closed, and he passed out.

My heart was thudding within my chest. I wanted that, too–more than anything.

Are these words his real feelings? I hope they are.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Dominick

My head hurt badly, similarly to that one time I helped take away the pain from a man who had his head rolled over by a wagon wheel. Yes, he survived, initially, although only for a few hours, and I sat with him and took away his pain. Let's just say, that's not the way I would choose to go.

The head pain I experienced after those serpent bites hurt even worse than that. I groaned. I did not often outwardly show my pain. I did not gasp or scream or groan often, but I needed some sort of release.

You are so weak, Veeto's voice was an unwelcome memory in such times of weakness.

No. I am strong, I assured myself.

"Dominick?" I knew that voice, and it was not in my mind.

Meria. She is here? I opened my eyes to see her at my bedside. Last I remembered, I was in the hull, helping patch the holes made by the hoard of small sea serpents. We had found a dozen in the hull, but had gotten them all out.

I will never underestimate the size of a magical sea creature. They do extensive damage, even when small.

"Are you feeling alright?" she asked, her voice pulling me from my thoughts.

"My head–" I said, barely able to speak. It was an almost unintelligible grumble, yet somehow, Meria seemed to understand.

"The poison, it will take some time to work itself out of your system. You should drink," she said, handing me a cup of water. I was unable to sit up, but she moved my head to the cup so the water could slip into my mouth.

Maybe I am weak. No, I was poisoned. Anyone would have a difficult time in my situation.

I tried to move my limbs, attempting to sit up even just a little. Nothing.

"Am I paralyzed?" She shook her head and forced me to drink the rest of the water.

"Can you not feel?" she asked after I finished drinking.

"Unfortunately, I can, but it seems hard to move."

"You are not paralyzed, and will be feeling much better soon."

"What happened?"

"You and a dozen of the crew were bitten by the sea serpents when you were trying to patch up the hull."

"Bitten?"

"Their bites are numbing at first, so you would not have felt it, but, eventually, you did."

"How long has it been?" I asked as I attempted, but failed, to remember such a thing occurring.

"Just a few hours. You passed out after Sands brought you in here."

"Did you–are *you* alright?" I asked, looking her over. She seemed as beautiful as ever, her soft, white-blond hair, over her shoulder and still in a braid. Her light blue eyes were so focused on me, I could not look away. She was so beautiful.

"I am."

"Well, thank you," I said, closing my eyes slowly as she let go of my wrist and stepped back.

"Rest for a while. I will be here when you wake up. The other crew members who were bitten are doing well with their recovery, too. Although no one was bitten as many times as you were. You really ought to be more

careful, Dominick," she said, reaching her hand out to remove some hair from my brow. "You are the captain of this ship, and we need you."

"Do *you* need me?" I was surprised I said such a thing. I smirked, opening my eyes a bit, trying to play it off.

"I do, and do remember that *you* also need *me*. We must come out of this adventure alive," she whispered, still playing with a few strands of my hair. If my body had been numb before, her touch shocked it back to intense feeling. But instead of feeling pain like I had when I first awoke, her touch was a balm, a warmth that made me never want her to stop touching me as long as I lived.

When she stepped back and removed her touch from me, the pain slowly made its way back, although not as acute as before when I had first come to.

Is that because of Meria?

"Okay, Dominick?" she asked.

I attempted to nod but found it difficult as my head felt so heavy. "I think I am going to fall asleep again," I grunted.

"Sleep," she said, and I felt her warm caress on the side of my face. "Rest, Dominick. I won't leave," she whispered, and I felt as if those words were the words that could heal my soul if she truly meant it–if my mermaid, truly, would never leave me. But she would–*she should*.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Meria

“We have arrived. Is the captain well?” Sands asked as he poked his head through the cabin door.

“He is still asleep. How are the other men who were affected by the bites?"

“Still asleep as well.”

“Okay,” I said, pausing. I worried about us staying in one place for too long. What if there were other creatures around us that would try to hurt us? We also needed to be quick because Peter was waiting for us on Pixie Isle.

“I think we just need a few more hours for them to rest so that they feel mostly recovered.”

“I can try to move the ship about, but if we come across another sea monster–” Sands said.

“I will help take care of that,” I answered.

Sands nodded and closed the door and paced back and forth in front of Dominick's bed. What was I going to do? I looked at Dominick’s sleeping form. I wanted to save him–keep him safe.

I walked up to him, placed my hand on his arm and traced the black veins there. The inky black veins were such a testament to his strength of will. I did not want him to be cursed–did not want him to be in pain. I cried, unable to stop the sorrow. I felt for all that Dominick must have endured through his life. My tears dripped onto his arms. I waited until all the black veins on both of his hands and arms had disappeared. I could do that much for him and still be able to ward off any sea creatures.

I smiled, noticing that his breathing was even and stronger. It was helping him. Soon his eyes opened, and he sat up. He looked around, and then down at his hands before saying anything. Maybe I should have put his gloves on him.

I watched, and it was as if it unfolded in slow motion as he looked at his hands, and he was clearly startled to see that the black veins there–were gone.

"I told you not to heal me, Meria." His eyes were cold with anger.

"You also told me *not* to do as you say."

"Do not help me. Save it for someone else–yourself," he snapped.

"If I had not, you would be without a hand and without a crew, all would have been lost in the depths of the sea! You might at this very moment not be breathing!" I shouted, and it was the first time in my life I had ever shouted at anyone. But I couldn't help it; the feelings that floated around inside of me were confusing, and he was confusing, and it was such a stark contrast from what had just been between us. How quickly the warmth had cooled down between us with his cool, 'Cruel Hand' demeanor.

"I can take care of myself! I have for my whole life!" he said, moving up in bed to sit. I went to sit beside him upon the bed, placing my hand on his shoulder.

"I understand that, but you do not have to."

He pushed my hand away. "Meria, I am fine, and I do not need help."

Anger crashed inside of me, again, like a huge wave. "Maybe that is your problem! You do not let people help till you are nearly dead!" I bellowed back.

He stood, not moving far, but he was off the bed. I quickly followed, standing in front of him, the bed just behind me.

"Get in bed. Rest, Meria; you have helped me enough. You have to be very tired," he said, his dark eyes flashing to my mouth before looking again at my eyes.

“No! I do not *want* to. I will not do what you say! You have a problem, Dominick!” I shouted again.

“*I* have a problem?” he said, his eyes bright with irritation. “Yes, I have many of those; where should I begin?”

I knew he was not looking for an answer, so I waited. I wanted to hear what he had to say.

“Should I begin with my curse? Maybe, I should begin with the fact that I was sent away from my family? That I lived with my cruel uncle who I am sure even the Traitor King himself would fear? Or you know what you *should* know–what I should *really* tell you first?” he asked, leaning in closer to me. My heart was beating erratically within my chest.

“I torture people, Meria,” his voice was deep, his tone dark and haunting. “I kept track of every single one. Five hundred and fifty-four. I tortured them all before they were tossed into the sea for dead.”

“Dominick–” I gasped.

“No, there is more,” he said, moving even closer to me. I did not move; he was not going to frighten me with his past. I was not afraid of him. “I steal from kingdoms. I use my title as a way to blend in, and then I steal gold and jewels. And do you want to know the worst of it all?”

Tears were streaming down my face, but not from fear, but from the pain I could sense inside of him. From all he had been forced to do, for the life he had with Veeto, that horrible man. Dominick was silent for a moment. Slowly, with his hands, he touched my face. His hands were still gloveless and clear of the black veins. He wiped away each tear, and I prayed to Mother Sea and to the Creator that my tears he was wiping away would finish whatever healing they could for him. His skin was rough, but warm. He was gentle even though the world he had known had only ever been cruel to him. I understood that he had been *forced* to be cruel.

“Dominick, I do not like seeing you like this.”

Dominick gently guided me, until my back was against the wall beside the bed. Only a few steps, but it seemed like miles.

“Of course not, and that is good. But I will go on because you need to know. You should be aware of the man you have put your trust in. The man you keep trying to *save*.”

“Dominick, it does not matter what you tell me. I know you are good,” I whispered. I heard the hum again, what I believed to be his soul’s melody.

With time, I was sure he would be able to release it. I knew how to pull it from him, and I would; I would show him.

He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. “I killed my father.”

I gasped, unable to control my surprise that he believed that. “No, you didn’t.” There was no way. Killing someone stripped the murderer’s soul.

“That is why I have this scar,” he said as he touched the side of his cheek where his scar was. “As I was inflicting unspeakable pain upon my father, he shoved me away. I fell and cut my face. It is a reminder of who I am– what I have done. My father’s last gift to me, that I would always remember him by. I killed him. Do you still wish to touch me, Meria? Still think I am not *bad*? Still think my touch won’t cause you pain? Still want to break my curse?” he taunted, so close but not touching me.

“I–” I began, but I did not have the words for all I was feeling. I had so many emotions flowing through me, but none of them indicated that he was so lost and beyond saving, or that he held no value, or that I should not care for him deeply. Yes, he had been through more horror than I or probably most mer or humans go through, but that did not mean he was not good at his core. He had goodness in him, and despite the bad in his past, that goodness was trying to sing free. I could hear it.

“Still think that there is something here within me worth a moment of your time? Because I am telling you, now, this is the only warning I will give you, *little mermaid*, there is nothing but darkness here.” He was panting, and I felt my face continue to become wet with tears.

I was shocked by his words, but my heart, more than ever, realized that all he had dealt with during his life had made him the strong man that he was, standing there before me.

“Dominick–” I whispered behind my tears.

“Do not cry for me. Please, do not pity me. You should fear for yourself.”

I looked up in confusion. I knew Dominick would never let harm come to me.

“I should also tell you that I am also very selfish,” he said, brushing a strand of hair off my cheek and wiping my face of its tears. “I am so incredibly selfish, Meria,” he whispered even closer to me.

“You are not selfish,” I whispered back.

“No?” he asked with a chuckle.

“You are *not*. You have gone through so much, Dominick, but you are searching for your sister. Through it all, you are doing good things.”

“Saving my sister?” He nodded, pressing his lips in a firm line. He turned his head to the side, a smile on his lips as if he were excited to prove me wrong. But he would not. “You want to know *why* I want to save her?”

I tried to keep on my feet, but my exhaustion was getting to me. I wobbled.

He gripped my shoulders, guiding me away from the wall, and onto the bed.

“I am looking for my sister so I can see my mother–not so I can save my sister because she deserves saving, but because it also helps *me*. If I show up with my sister, my mother cannot turn me away. I will see her face to face and get my revenge for all she has put me through by giving me up–and for sending me off to be on Veeto’s ship.”

“Dominick–”

“And you want to know what else makes me the most selfish? What makes me the most wicked?” he asked, leaning to place my legs upon the bed–pushing my shoulders so I was laying on my back. He climbed beside me, not touching me, but we were a few inches apart. He just looked at me, his eyes wild with something I did not understand, but wanted to, desperately.

“What?” I asked, my mind reeling with all the new information, but my heart was ever constant, not caring for him any less, but ever caring for him even more, the more he spoke. For the more he spoke, the more he divulged, and the stronger his faint melody became. His inner soul’s melody, deep inside of him, began to reach out to mine.

“What makes you the most selfish?” I asked, needing and wanting to know.

“This–” he whispered against my lips; then he crushed his lips against mine. His hands dug into my hair. Kissing him was like breathing in sea water–refreshing, all consuming. I was selfish, too–I also wanted his kiss. I wanted everything from him. I was not afraid of his past, not afraid of the dark parts. I cared about *him*. I knew that I always would. I loved him.

I love him.

I love all of him. Every single broken, cracked, or dark piece. I wanted them all, wanted him.

He broke our lips apart, and then he looked at me.

“I am so selfish, Meria–because I want you. I want to keep you forever and ever.” He teased kisses down my neck, over my cheeks, all around my

face, and I wanted his lips so badly to find mine once more. “I want to lock you up in the cell below, make sure you never escape,” he growled into my skin as he continued to kiss me again and again, drenching me in pure bliss and joy.

“You want me in the dungeons?” I laughed quietly. “If that is where you want me–”

“Perhaps, this room can act as your prison cell, my mermaid captive. I have to admit that I like the sound of that.” He kissed me again, gently against my jaw and then my throat. “I like the sound of you never leaving, never finding another man–mer, human, or magical being–to be with. Just me.”

“You cannot keep me prisoner,” I said tenderly as he peppered kisses down my neck, making me dizzy with the need for him to never stop touching his lips to my skin.

“But I can. Remember, I am not a good man, Meria. I am a rather wicked pirate, with no desire to change my selfish and greedy ways. We pirates love treasure, and I think I found what I have been searching for over all these seas,” he said, meeting my eyes and smirking at me.

“Well,” I tried to be calm even though what he was saying lit up my entire world. “I like pirates. And I would not be your prisoner because I have no desire to leave you,” I said, tangling my fingers at the back of his head in his soft, dark brown hair.

He groaned. “You do not?” he asked as I began kissing his jaw at the rough stubble there. He always let his hair grow for a couple of days, and then he shaved.

I pulled away and looked at his flushed face and messed up hair from my fingers running through it. He was the most handsome man I had ever laid my eyes upon. And that man, he was kissing me, and I was kissing him, and it was a thousand times better than the last kiss I had been given by Edmar. Edmar was nothing to that. Finn had been right; my soul did know when I was in love.

This is love.

It was life changing. I was more attached to him than ever before. I was a barnacle, he a ship, and I would not come off.

“I am not going anywhere without you,” I said.

“Be careful what you wish for. I think this pirate is corrupting you,” he whispered.

“No, the opposite, actually. I am going to make *your* soul sing, Dominick.” Before I could say anything else, his lips devoured mine, like he was a stranded, starving sailor on a deserted island, like my lips were the most delicious thing he had ever tasted, and he was addicted after just one taste. I had no idea how long those powerfully warm lips danced with mine, but I was sure there was nothing better on any land or under any seas.

“It already sings for you, Meria,” Dominick whispered against my ear. I was unable to think about anything else, All there *was* was us. Dominick with his salty sea scent; his warm, tanned skin, caressing mine; and his dark hair, falling into his eyes, along with the erratic beating of my heart–my heart that only beat for him, and the soul song that swirled around us.

We broke apart, hearing a steady thumping at the door. I wondered what it was, but then I saw Sands inside the room, knocking on the door, his back to us.

“What are you doing in here!” Dominick snapped at him.

“Oh, is it safe to look?” Sands said, peeking over his shoulder to look at us.

I felt my cheeks darken with embarrassment.

“Get out,” Dominick sighed.

“Wish I could, but we are still on a ship, and you are still its captain. You *know*, I wouldn't break *this* up unless it was important,” Sands said with a knowing look. “Hello, Meria,” he nodded to me.

“Shut up,” Dominick said, reaching behind my head on top of the pillow for his gloves, and then putting them on. He met my eyes and looked over my face; his hand, then, still not gloved, caressed my skin around my mouth. “It looks like you have been thoroughly kissed, my mermaid.” That smile was one I had never seen before–there was a sense of pride there, and something else. “Tell me, was it different this time versus the last time when you kissed your betrothed?” he asked with a playful grin.

He had to know that what we had just shared was rare–was life changing.

“Completely different. It was incredible,” I sighed, feeling like a puddle of water and unable to move or say much from the shock of what had just happened between us. Would it happen again? I wanted to kiss him everyday for the rest of my existence.

“I will see you soon,” he whispered, and to my surprise, he bent down and gently yet quickly pressed his lips to mine again. When he stepped back, he was smiling with the same confident look on his face. He winked,

and I felt my face warm. His confidence and happiness were some of the most attractive things I had ever seen. They made my body shiver. I really really liked that pirate.

“Okay, love birds–” Sands said, reminding me he was still there.

“Oh, you are still here,” Dominick said, turning to look at Sands, who was, indeed, still there by the door. Dominick quickly put on his gloves, and with one last look at me and then a beautiful grin, which made my jaw open wide and him chuckle, he was gone, and the door was closed behind him.

I was alone. Alone in his bed, alone in his room, alone with my thoughts. He was mine. I would never let him go.

As I closed my eyes, I touched my face. His warmth there had been so absolutely wonderful. With that kiss, I was more his mermaid than ever before. My heart was his, and I would go wherever he went until the day I died. Perhaps, I was his prisoner after all, only a very willing one.

I was not sure how long I slept, and I couldn’t remember how many days it had been since Pixie Isle. But when I woke up, I knew something was wrong, *again*. It could have been anything in those dangerous waters, and I needed to find out what it was. My legs ached.

When was the last time I had been in the sea? Maybe I could swim and also check out the waters around us for dangerous, magical sea creatures. Or, perhaps, one that was already there, because I did feel magic.

There was a small, sealed window behind the captain's desk, but a circular port window on the side. I could shimmy myself through that if it opened.

To my luck, there was a little lever that opened the window. I smiled again. I stripped off my pants, shirt, jacket, and vest. Then I walked to Dominick's closet, and I pulled out one of his black shirts and held it up. *Once I turn back into a human, it will cover the important human parts of me.* I pulled it on.

I shimmied myself out the window and dove into the welcoming sea below.

As soon as I hit the water, the frigid temperature was so foreign to me that I felt a bit numb. After I inhaled the water through my gills and swam deeper, I began to become used to the temperature. I had no idea what I would find. I focused on the water and swam around the ship, going back and forth. I soaked up the feeling of the salt water and the movement of my tail. It seemed so long ago since I had been in the sea; it always felt so long. I loved the sea, loved the feeling of water in my lungs, loved the swishing of my tail, propelling me forward, and my hair gliding behind me. It felt right–good. But there was something I sensed in the water; something was off.

As I went to dive a bit deeper, I heard a call–a mermaid call, but it sounded different from the calls I knew. It was as if the sound was drenched in squid ink. An uncomfortable, dark sound. A sound all sea creatures, humans, and mer feared.

The sirens' call. No, it could not be. Could it? These waters are cold enough and wild enough. Anything could be here.

I moved directly under the ship and saw dark fins, with an obvious lack of color.

Sirens. Soulless abominations.

Sirens with their unnatural, pointed, razor teeth, their nails sharp, and their faces sunken and hollow with haunting, black, soulless eyes.

Sirens were once mermaids–mermaids who became corrupted because they did not follow the ways of the Creator nor the laws of the sea; they had been seduced by the darkness, and lost their soul-melodies, which connected us, not only to our world, but to our Creator above it. Even though melodies had been forgotten about by humanity, humans and magical beings were meant to have melodies of the soul, even after the Great War. Whenever magical beings lost their soul-songs to corruption, their loss of connection to each other, other creatures, and to the Creator turned them into unnatural, dark, soulless creatures–and mermaids, they became sirens.

Long ago, some humans, like the sirens, had also corrupted their melodies, and that led to the lack of soul-song recognition amongst humans. It was said that the Traitor King Falcon had been the first human in more than a thousand years to become so corrupt that he not only could no longer

hear his melody, but he destroyed it entirely–becoming a *soulless* abomination, and then he did his best to bury all knowledge of souls' melodies forever. He may have been successful if the mer race had not been hidden away by the Ancients.

Because sirens were the first ultimate abomination, their hearts could only continue to beat within them, if they stole and consumed the hearts of men.

Mermaids and sirens kept away from each other, and sirens preferred to dwell in deeper, darker waters. I should have thought about that before I found myself in their seas.

I swam to the surface, observing many of them looking up at the ship, and a few of the crew members were leaning over the rail, looking back at them. After a few minutes, I watched in horror as the sirens opened their mouths and began to sing. Only it was not a beautiful song like mer souls' melodies. It was terrifying. Mer songs came from within. Sirens made loud shrieks and screams, no words at all, only horribly unpleasant noises came from their mouths, and a twisted, corrupted, dark magic spewed from within them, and somehow, they could lure men to follow after them.

A normal mermaid song was also persuasive. We could help persuade humans and sea creatures to do as we asked, but we couldn't force any of them to do anything. If any human or magical creature did not want to do as we desired, they could choose to break through our songs. Sirens commanded, and the hearts of men were weakened by them and left entirely vulnerable to their commands. I cringed, just thinking about something so horrible. Sirens wanted blood, hearts, and death.

Many mer believed that the Traitor King created the first siren by torturing an innocent mermaid to the brink of death, and when he was unsuccessful in gaining that mer's power for himself, he left her in a state of despondency and humiliation, having broken her completely, and having stolen all her innocence from her, he left her for dead, believing that she would soon die. That mermaid did not die, but she had been abused to a state of insanity and abject hatred. That mermaid, not recognizing her torn and polluted song, sought after revenge. She hunted down a human and sunk her nails deep into his chest, screeching at him, dragging him into the depths of the sea, ripping out his heart. Then she devoured it.

It was a horrible tale, but one I had heard hundreds of times. Humans were dangerous. We had always been taught that. Perhaps, the story was

true. No one knew for sure.

I looked back and forth between the ship and the water. The sirens' sickening, lilting screeches made the men aboard the ship smile. They could not hear the sickness of it–could not hear the corruption. I swam to the side of the ship and climbed up the rope. I ran to the wheel to find Sands.

"Sands! Tell them to cover their ears," I shouted as I reached him.

"What is that horrible sound?" he said, and I noticed he was covering one ear and cringing, but he was not affected by their call.

"You can hear the screams?" I said with surprise. It was said that a siren could only lure a man's *willing* heart–a heart not given to another. Did Sands love someone?

"Yes, of course; it is awful. What is making that sound?"

"Sirens. There are over a hundred all around the ship!" I shouted. Sands' face changed from annoyance to fear. Pirates, if they had never met a siren, had to have at least heard the lore. Too many men had lost their lives to them.

A crew member walked near us and mumbled: "That song–it is so lovely. I think I would like to take a swim," he said, slowly shifting from side to side.

"George!" Sands smacked his face, but he only smiled. We walked around the ship, smacking the men and using their hands to cover their own ears, hoping they would snap out of the dark, magical lure. I looked over the ship and down at the sirens, their teeth gnashing with human blood permanently staining their teeth a pink color. Their eyes were soulless, nothing but blackness inside. Their hair was gnarled and messy, long masses about them–their skin a dark blueish, green tint.

I began to sing, not only from my soul's melody, but from my voice, too. I hoped to drown out their screeches.

Corruption, Soulless, leave–
Do not come near–
We follow the Creator,
We have no need to fear.

I sang loudly, and I watched as a few of the sirens paused their calls to watch me.

They hissed, becoming louder, their squeals, then, actually became words, but just barely.

They sang:

Come men,
Come, let us give you rest–
Rest and safety in this sea–
We will give you rest at the seabed floor–
And give your heart peace.

I watched in horror as two men jumped overboard, and again in horror as two sirens latched their razor teeth to the men's mouths, kissing them while dragging them under.

"Stop!" I called out to them. "Stop it! Now!"

"Silence!" a siren screamed at me with a sickening noise.

"Leave!" I sang, using the melody inside of me, given by the Creator, and I called upon my magic to make it even more bright and powerful.

The sirens sang in unison.

We need hearts;
We need blood,
We hunger;
We must feed.

I ran to the edge of the ship where a candle burned. I broke off some of the candle wax, and with my hands, I kneaded it until it was soft and malleable. Quickly, going from crew member to crew member, I instructed them to place the wax in their ears. Once they regained their minds, I motioned for them to help the most susceptible crew members. Some, like Sands, were not affected.

Where is Dominick? I wondered as I moved about the ship.

Had he been pulled under? Was he dead? I could not think of that; it was too painful. Once I finished and the crew appeared to be no longer affected by the corruption, I again found Sands.

"Where is Dominick?" I begged, clutching his shirt in my hands.

"I have not seen him," he said, worry on his brow.

I heard angry screeching from the sea and looked over the edge of the ship. The sirens were leaving.

“Humans are weak,” I heard one siren screeching. I peered into the water in horror. Dominick was in her grasp. His eyes were closed.

“NO!” I screamed. Before I knew what I was doing, I jumped into the water. My tail returned, and I swam after that siren.

“He is mine. His heart is mine, he dove in–he wanted this,” she hissed in a scratchy sort of *coo*.

“If his heart is yours, why is he still alive?” I knew somehow they had knocked him into the sea, perhaps had lured one of the crew members to do it for them. He would never go willingly.

“He is tied to you. Why?” she squealed.

“Go, you can only have *free* hearts, and you know it. He is already taken.”

“I can still watch in joy as he drowns,” she hissed.

“Go, I command you to leave this place, siren.” I swam closer to her, took one of Dominick's hands, and his glove came off. Then, an idea came to me, as I realized that the siren was not going to let him go; her sharp claw-like nails had pierced through his shirt. She needed to touch his skin–his curse. It could save him.

“Fine, take him, but I want these,” I said, pulling away the second glove. I watched as the siren smiled a horrible awful smile and moved in closer to Dominick, but not before touching his hand–his cursed skin. Even without the veins in his hands, I knew the curse was still there inside of him.

I watched as she touched him and then began to writhe in pain. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head. I watched as the pain caused her to let go. Then, Dominick was sinking into the depths. I swam to him, pulling him up above the water.

“He is cursed!” she snapped and swam back.

“Go!” I shouted with emphasis from my melody. She screeched one last time, then slumped down into the sea and was finally gone. I did my best to keep Dominick's head above the water, which was moving back and forth rather aggressively. I touched his face–it was fine, but his arm was bleeding from the siren’s grasp, but everything else seemed okay. I had no idea why he was not conscious, but I had to get him out of the water. I swam to the side of the ship where Sands was looking overboard, and he tossed us a rope, and some crew members pulled us up. Once we were on the deck, Dominick lay there, only breathing slowly.

“Is he–” Sands said carefully.

“No, he is still breathing. I don't know what they did to him, though.”

“Did they rip out his heart?” one crew member asked in a whisper.

“I didn't mean to push him, I swear–they got in my mind,” another sailor cried out.

“They knocked him out–” someone else said. Their minds must be clearing as the sirens stopped their screeching and swam away.

I shook my head. Tears dripped down my cheeks, and I let them fall onto Dominick’s face.

“Please, wake up, Dominick,” I begged, touching his scruffy jaw.

“I wish you would wake up. I wish we could leave this place.” I caressed his face and leaned over his chest, resting my head there.

“I don’t know if you see me in this way. I would not blame you if you didn’t, but I love you, Dominick. I love you, and I want to give you all that I have. I want to be there for you always. Will you let me? I want to be with you. Please do not leave me,” I cried, and more tears fell from my eyes, I hoped they were doing *something*–anything.

I sang,

Please, Creator of all, save this soul.

Dominick shifted, and his eyes fluttered open.

“Meria?” he asked, a small smile on his lips.

“I am here, Dominick. Are you alright?” I asked, wiping at my face.

He reached his hand up and caressed my cheek. “Do not cry for me, beautiful.” Then he placed his hand on top of my own, which was resting on his chest. He pressed our hands together, and without another word, he lost consciousness again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Dominick

When I awoke and my pain felt almost completely gone and warmth and peace flooded through me, I was sure I was in the Ancient Lands, certain I was dead.

I felt a warm wind on my face, warmth wrapped around my body as if I were in an embrace. I was hugging that warmth back, that peace, pulling it closer and closer to me. I buried my face in that warmth.

Then the warmth, that peace, made a sound. A small sigh of contentment, and I opened my eyes. It took me a few blinks to see the picture clearly before me. There, right before me, was the face of the most beautiful maiden I had ever seen, but she was all too familiar, although my memory seemed fuzzy around the edges. Her light blond locks in a tangled mess made me smile. I realized then that her arms were wrapped around me, yet mine were also wrapped around her. It was as if had we not latched onto each other, we would have both died.

What transpired? How had I landed in this situation?

I could not be upset because the pain was nearly gone, and without the pain, my negative thoughts were gone. All I thought about was Meria, her beauty, her grace, her heart, and her soul.

Can Meria and I sail the seas together? Will she want to? With me? After I have my revenge on my mother, can we be together?

"Dominick?" I heard her whisper, but her eyes were closed. She was still asleep, and she clutched me tighter.

Can I really be the one Meria clings to? Really be the person she wants beside her, day and night, for the rest of her life?

How wonderful that felt, even for a moment, even if it was fiction to imagine, it brought such a brightness to my soul.

"Dominick," she gasped again as if in fear. The tremble of her lips, and the furrow upon her beautiful brow caused my heart to ache. It was the same reaction that most people had–what people did when I touched them.

Did I hurt her?

"Meria–" I whispered, untangling one arm.

"I need you, Dominick," she said faintly into my chest, her face pressed there. I watched in awe as she tilted her face up, her eyes still closed.

I reached down to caress her cheek.

Is she real? Or is this a dream?

She whimpered in her sleep, and I wanted to take away the furrow from her brow.

"Meria, you are well," I whispered as I moved some hair from her face. After a few minutes of my gentle words, her eyes opened. I would never forget that sleepy smile that came upon her face as she looked at me, the cursed, pirate that I was.

Did I truly kiss those lips? Will I kiss them again? I wanted to–how desperately.

"Dominick, how are you feeling?" she said faintly, untangling her arm to reach up and brush hair from my brow. I was surprised and frozen as she traced her finger over my scar, then to my ear, and touched my golden earring there. That was new. I wondered what she thought of it.

"I am well," I said, barely even audible, and she continued to play with my golden hooped earring.

"I am so glad you are awake."

"As am I. If I am awake, that is," I said, caressing her cheek and her mouth as she smiled. "Ancients, you are beautiful, Meria."

“You are so wickedly handsome,” she said.

“Wickedly? Rather accurate.”

She looked at me with a gentle smile, and when I dropped my hand down to touch her back and hair, she stiffened. She was partially on top of me, a rather compromising position. Not prince-like nor gentlemanly of me at all. But in my defense, I had been unconscious; she was the one who climbed into *my* bed, at least I assumed that. I wished for her to never leave. She looked down as if just realizing our positioning. She gasped, placed her hands upon my chest, and removed herself from on top of me. She slid from the bed and landed on the floor, standing and running hands over the large shirt she wore. I smiled, even though I wished she was still in my arms. She was wearing my shirt, and I absolutely loved it.

“I am so sorry; I should not have–”

“Been in my bed?” I smirked.

I enjoyed seeing the pink of her cheeks.

“Having you in my bed is rather preferable,” I said with a wicked grin.

“Dominick! Although you are a pirate, you are also a prince!”

“And you keep forgetting that although I am a prince by birth, I am more a wicked pirate,” I said with a wink.

“You are *not* wicked,” she said, taking a step back.

“Is that so? Then why are you moving away when I desire to kiss you so thoroughly that everyone aboard this ship will see it about your mouth.”

“What?” she said in shock.

“My whiskers, when I kiss you, they leave a little redness.”

“I should not be here,” she said, avoiding eye contact with me.

“Ah, you should be *here*, my beautiful mermaid,” I said, raising my hands out on each side and motioning to my chest. She looked at me for a moment and stepped even further away.

“Why are you going so far away? I thought I was wickedly handsome? This wickedly handsome pirate wishes to ravish you with kisses in my bed.”

“Dominick! I know you are only saying these things to shock me.” She placed her hands so attractively on her hips. I tried to not look at her rather beautiful exposed legs.

“And are you shocked?” I asked. It was true; I was more of a gentleman, but I was also a man, a man looking upon the most beautiful maiden I had

ever seen, and she was wearing *my* shirt. It was even more attractive to see her reaction to my teasing and flirting.

"No," she said rather hesitantly. I sat up and with only a few steps, I had her in my arms, where she belonged in my opinion. She resisted, playfully, for only a moment before sighing and placing her head upon my chest, her hands clutching the fabric of the shirt I wore. I looked at her eyes–those beautiful blue-white eyes that held me captive with their light.

"I know you are honorable," she whispered.

"Pirates are not honorable, my little mermaid. We keep having this conversation," I said as I brushed my nose along her jawline and trailed it down her neck, making sure my breath was hot on her neck. I felt her body relax, and I wanted to cheer, so satisfied that I had made her feel so relaxed. Has anyone else ever felt that way with my touch and my presence? No, only Meria.

"Dominick," she sighed, and although I was as honorable as a pirate prince could be, I wished at that moment that I was not. I wished I truly was a wicked pirate. But, I had very little that I could claim as actually good about me. I faked many things, but it was true that I was not a man who sought to take advantage of women's attention. I did not have many things–but I had that virtue. Meria's kiss had been my very first, and if I had it my way, it would also be my last.

"I am enjoying seeing you in this shirt of mine, Meria," I said, touching the fabric at her shoulder.

"Dominick!"

"It looks good on you–might be my favorite thing–"

"Stop!" she said, swatting at my chest.

"Okay, I will stop, and I will release you, but for a price," I said against the side of her neck.

"What price could a pirate want? I have no treasure, no gold, no gems."

"Ah–you are very much mistaken. *You* are the treasure I want," I said.

"I already told you, I am *your* mermaid."

She had, but was it our jest? Or was it that she truly wanted to be my mermaid? We had kissed, and that was something, something I would never let go of. I was far too selfish to give her up, ever.

I tangled my hand in her messy hair. "Tell me what happened," I asked as I began to caress her hair.

She turned.

“Will you braid it again? It’s driving me to madness.”

“Well, we cannot have a mad mermaid aboard this ship,” I chuckled. She turned around, and I began. It took some time to untangle it, and then, I slowly sectioned and braided her very long hair.

“You were taken by a siren,” she said.

“A siren?”

“One of the crew members pushed you over after being coaxed by one of the sirens. One of them explained that after you fell, a siren knocked you unconscious.” I closed my eyes and stopped braiding. I had no memory of such a thing.

“If I was taken by a siren, why is my heart not ripped from my chest?”

“Did you know that not all humans are affected by the siren call?”

“No,” I said, continuing to braid.

“Only those with willing or weak hearts. It seems your heart was strong. They could not take your heart.”

“Because my heart was already taken?” I wanted to say something about it being hers. But no, it was way too soon to tell Meria that she had begun to take up a large place in my heart. I did not know anything about true love–or even the idea of love for that matter, but I felt something with Meria that I had never felt before.

Was that love? I was not sure. So until I was sure, I would stay silent on matters of love.

“Or you are strong enough to resist them.”

“I am sure that I am strong because of all the pain I endure.”

“I am so glad you are well. We did not know if you would wake up. We were able to save most of the crew, but Sands said we lost about seven men to those soulless abominations.”

“Horrible loss. Did the crew honor them?”

“Yes, a true sea burial. Sands performed it all, and only just this morning.”

I nodded. A sea grave was the way I wished to go someday, but, hopefully, after a longer life–that is, as long as I can live it on my terms.

“Thank you, again, for saving me, and the crew,” I said, but there was so much more I wanted to say. She had done so much, and I would never be able to repay her. I finished her braid and took a small piece of ribbon sitting on the side table, and I tied it at the end. I placed the end over her shoulder, and she touched it.

“You are so good at this, Dominick."

“I told you, it is nothing. Maidens have much prettier ones on land. They don't look so much like a rope when they do it,” I shrugged.

“My sister would sometimes braid sections of my hair, but usually I did nothing to it.”

“Do you miss your family?” I asked curiously.

“Not my father, but I do miss my cousin, sisters, and my nieces and nephews.”

“How many nieces and nephews do you have? I am sure you are a wonderful aunt.”

“Nineteen boys and twenty-five girls. I love children, and I hope to have a large family someday,” she said, standing with her head down as if that was a shameful thing.

That was the opposite of shameful. She would be an incredible mother. I could see it already in the way she was so kind, gentle, and loving. She was someone who deserved to be protected, yet she always cared for others. I never had a mother in my life, of course, aboard Veeto’s ship, but for the years I did, my mother had been all those things–although it had been an act. With Meria, it would not be.

“That sounds perfect,” I said.

She whipped her head up, looking me directly in my eyes. The look she gave me was astonishing.

“What?” she asked, surprised.

I chuckled, brushing her cheek. “You will make a wonderful mother. You should have as many children as you desire; they shall be incredibly blessed with you as their mother.”

“Thank you, but I need to find them a father first. I thought I was ready for that part of my life, and then–although I am happy I discovered the truth–I am far away from it yet again,” she said as if in defeat.

An image flashed before my eyes: me sitting on the beach beside her with three children at our feet. It went away as quickly as it came. I had always enjoyed when I was able to help children find relief from their pain, using my curse. If I was not a cursed pirate, but a cursed prince, I would have a similar dream of a family with a load of children to take upon my ship and travel the world together, exploring.

I could create an entire crew, I thought with a smile.

But such a thing was not possible. The best I could hope for was my own crew and ship as far away from Walden and Veeto as I could get.

"You would make a wonderful father," she whispered. "I hope you have a daughter so you do not lose your braiding skills," she said with a smile.

"A father?" I was surprised. I could not say anything. I was too consumed with my thoughts and feelings. Not only because of the things she was saying, but because of the never ending need–or desire–that I had for her. That I wanted to make all those dreams come true for her, but with me beside her. I meant what I said when I kissed her. I was selfish enough to keep her even if she could be with someone better suited, someone who could help her create the family and life she wanted.

I suddenly heard something faint inside of me. There was something inside of me that started to sing, just for her. If I had a soul, I would have argued that it felt like my soul.

"Yes, and I dare say, even though you tease that you are wicked, you would do a fine job of it, better than my betrothed would have; I am sure of it."

I could not contain the irritation I had for whoever that merman was. He was an idiot, a blasted fool. But I was also grateful that he had chased her away.

Without that, would she have ever found me? I would be very sad to have never met Meria.

"I am so sorry for what he did to you," I said, trying to contain my irritation to my fists, which were clenched painfully at my sides.

"He broke–" she shook her head. "I gave him so much."

"I–" But before I could say anything, the door to the cabin swung open.

Sands was going to walk the plank.

"What is it?" I growled.

"We have arrived, and I am afraid we can not stay in one place, so the boat is circling the island where the Mirror Sea is located."

"And that has you scared so senseless that you had to barge into my room when I just might have been having my way with my mermaid?"

"Sorry, Nick, I assumed you were still bedridden."

"You are lucky we are dressed!" I snapped. I knew Sands would not take offense. He knew me too well. I was hoping my words would rattle Meria. I so liked to shock her.

Meria gasped, trying to push me away. "Dominick!"

“What, Meria? You are a mermaid, and I can never be sure what you will or will not be wearing.”

“Stop it!” she said, covering her cheeks.

I laughed. I felt so different, so light. There was no pain keeping a smile from my mouth.

“Save the poor maiden embarrassment. I know you did nothing with her, except maybe steal a few kisses,” Sands reprimanded me; then he smiled at Meria with a wink.

That annoyed me, and I moved to block his view of her wearing only my shirt, though it was long enough to be considered a dress of sorts.

“Prepare a boat. We shall head to the island, and you shall stay here to make sure the boat and crew are well,” I said.

“Of course, yes.” He saluted, then left the room, closing the door behind him.

“Time to go.”

If I could find my sister, I would speak with my mother. But if I found a way to remove my curse, perhaps, I could have a life with Meria, one like she dreamed about, and her dream was starting to sound like the perfect dream for me, too. If I broke my curse, perhaps, Meria could have what she desired, but with me. I would gladly help her have the family she desired. I smiled and ducked my head to kiss Meria gently on the lips, something I was sure I had no right to do, but I had kept doing it after our first kiss, and I would continue until she told me to stop. I did not know what all those feelings meant, or what those kisses meant on that day, but I enjoyed my life at that moment for the first time since I was a young boy back in Walden.

“See you on deck.” I did not meet her eyes, but walked from the room as quickly as I could, needing to figure out the path before me, and fast.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Meria

It was hard to breathe as I paced back and forth in the captain's quarters. Even though I was happy with the interaction I had just had with Domnick, I was still worried.

What else will we discover on this journey? Do I have enough strength to continue to save this ship?

I hoped that whatever we faced, I could continue to help. It had been a while since I thought of my father, but for some reason, that was where my mind went.

How is he? How are my sisters and my family? Are the lights still dimming? Will I be able to find my mother in time to help my people?

I drew in a breath, but was startled as a knock sounded on my door.

"Meria?" The voice sounded familiar in a way that felt off, for it did not match my situation on board the ship.

Do I really miss home so much that I am imagining him?

As I opened the door, I could not believe it; Finn was standing there before me, not only with legs and on the ship, but he was dressed like a pirate. His melody swirled around me.

"Finn!?" I gasped, before covering my mouth, reaching out to grab him, then pulling him into the room and slamming the door behind us.

"What in all the seas are you doing here, Finn?"

"Happy to see me, Meria? Ancients, I have missed you, and I needed to check in on you," he said, walking around the room in awe; everything there seemed to fascinate him, and I was sure it did; he had always loved looking at the things humans dropped into the sea.

"Of course, I am happy to see you; I am just surprised."

"Sorry to surprise you, but your ship has been hard to track in these waters, and I also had to veer away from a huge swarm of sirens."

"They just attacked us."

"Awful abominations," he said, shaking his head.

I was so happy to see my cousin that I ran to him and wrapped my arms around him. He smelled like the sea and seaweed, and it made me laugh.

"Are you alright, Meria?"

"It is so good to see you; I did not realize, till now, how much I have missed you."

"Really great to be appreciated. You did not think I would leave you alone with a pirate, did you?"

"Finn, tell me, how are they?"

"Things are bad, Meria; more and more mer are becoming sick."

"It's the lights, Finn, I just know it. If the mer rose, I think that would help," I sniffled into his shirt. Finn patted my back.

“You have a plan, and once you speak with your mother, I know we will have the answers needed to help us.” He pulled me tighter into our hug, and I was never more grateful for my cousin.

The door burst open, and standing there was Dominick, his chest rising and falling rapidly as his eyes settled upon Finn and me. I pulled away from Finn and was about to introduce him, but Dominick spoke first.

“Get away from her!” he shouted, crossing the room to stand in between us.

“Dominick–” I began, but Finn spoke up.

“The Cruel Hand, is it?” Finn asked with a chuckle. “Fearsome, but not as fearsome as what I have seen *under* the sea.”

“You are a mer?” Dominick asked.

I noticed then that Dominick had a knife out. I touched his shoulder, but did not know what else to do. He clearly thought Finn was a threat, and Finn, of course, was acting as if it were a joke. He was going to get gutted.

“Yes, I am Meria's–” but before Finn could finish, Dominick’s eyes grew wide with some understanding, and he moved quickly to pin Finn against the wall. His knife was at his throat, and Finn was no longer smiling.

“Get off my ship. You had your chance with Meria, and she did not want you. Leave, and never come back. How dare you!”

“Fine, I will leave, but you are horribly incorrect.”

“I doubt that after what you did to her,” Dominick growled.

“Just go, Finn; I will find you later,” I finally spoke.

Dominick reluctantly let him go and watched as he walked from the cabin. As soon as the door shut, Dominick turned to me.

“Are you alright, Meria?”

“Yes, I am fine. What is going on?”

His face was so close to mine that I caught my breath, unable to say anything else.

“I am so sorry you had to endure him coming here. I am so sorry for the pain you may be feeling. I can take it away if you’d like,” he said, rubbing his hand over my jaw.

“I am alright, thank you, but he would never hurt me.” I paused, and he waited for me to finish, tilting my chin up to look him in the eye.

“You do not need to thank me, Meria. I would do it again and so much more for you.” He bent down and kissed my cheek, making my entire body

heat up, desiring nothing else but to be in his arms. “I came in here to tell you that we are ready to go onto the island.”

“Oh, that is great. But Dominick, Finn is not a threat to me. I have missed him so very much.” My words were jumbled. I knew I wasn’t saying enough.

“Finn, is it?”

“I am happy to see him again; he is my dearest friend, and I love him.”

“Great,” Dominick said, pulling away.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, you two can meet me at the back of the ship.” Then he left.

What is going on? What did I miss?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Dominick

I felt sick. I never got seasickness, but I wondered if the queasy feeling in my belly and the pain in my chest was what it felt like. It really was horrid, and I was grateful I had never had it before. Dark thoughts misted around within me, and my veins pulsed with pain. I had taken upon myself pain so often that it was almost comforting at times. But at that moment, what was happening to my heart was the worst pain I had ever endured.

I need this pain–this ache–to end.

I paced back and forth in the hall, looking for something–anything to do, but all I could think of was Meria and *him*. That vile man who did not deserve her, whom she loved.

Loves.

She loves him.

He had come for her, her betrothed. I should have known. No one could easily give up such a person, or mermaid, as her.

She is–What is she? She is nothing to me–right?

I shook my head. My heart pierced with a pain that seemed to poison my core, my soul, my very being.

No, she is everything, and of course, I would lose her–lose everything.

She loved *him.* I heard the words from him, confessing his love, and I saw their embrace.

I had come to the door to tell her that it was time to go ashore, and I paused there, hearing voices. I was too curious for my own good. Maybe, I should have simply knocked. Maybe, then, I would not have had to listen to those sickening words, to the love confession and see the embrace. I knew they had kissed before; had they kissed again?

I had so much pain in my veins and within my history, so that one might think that nothing at that point could even faze me, and yet, that pain, the pain of seeing Meria in the arms of someone else caused an injury that was more acute than any other I had ever felt. I would have taken all the pain I had ever felt before, tenfold, in order to rid myself of that new pain; it seeped inside my heart and my soul. I needed something to take it away. I was going to die from it.

"What is the matter?" Sands asked, far too perceptive for his own good.

"I need a drink."

"You have water in your pocket, like always," Sands said as if it were a joke. I turned to him, shoved my fist at his throat and pulled him by his collar into my face.

"I need a drink, now," I growled at him.

His eyes grew wide.

"You said you would never touch the stuff."

"I am The Cruel Hand–I lied."

"What is the matter? Why are you so out of control, right now? This is not like you, Nick"

"Give me something. I need something," I began to gasp; even breathing was difficult. A man ran past, and I grabbed him, shoving him against the wall. I took off my glove and touched his skin.

"Bring me rum, now." I felt his pain slither inside of me, and I smiled wickedly, knowing he would do as I asked. The man screamed, and I released him. "Unless you want more–" But he was off before I could finish my sentence. I put my glove back on.

"Nick, what in the seas is going on? What happened?"

I didn’t say anything. I had no idea what to say. A few minutes later the man was back, holding a glass bottle. I pressed it against my lips and drank as quickly as I could, desiring more than anything to feel nothing for once in my miserable life.

“Stop it, you will poison yourself,” Sands said, taking the bottle from my hand. I wiped off my mouth on my sleeve and glared at him. “What is the matter? For all the years I have known you, you have never behaved like this. You have never had a drop in your life.”

“Nothing,” I snarled.

“This is *not* nothing. Where is Meria?”

“With her *lover*,” I shouted, turned and walked to the back of the ship.

“Her lover? You are not making any sense,” Sands said, following after me. I took another swig, the drink burning down my throat.

“Leave me.”

“No, not till I know what in the fathoms you are doing!”

I leaned against the railing, waiting, Sands glaring at me, but still silent. I waited for the rum to do its job and numb me–waited for the pain to go away, and I waited for *Finn* and Meria to appear.

I then saw Finn approach with a smile on his lips. Was he happy to be the winner? He had won Meria.

Did I even have a chance?

Hope was a blasted, vile thing that only opened up my heart to more pain. I would never have such hope again. I should have never wished for such a thing as a normal life–to possibly be with Meria and have a family. A family. I could still see it in my mind, that image I had created of a life I so desperately wanted, and then that mer came and dashed it all against the rocks.

Does Finn suddenly want a family? I knew she wanted that. She should not compromise that. I shook my head. Something was wrong with the drink; it was not working. Everything seemed foggy. The ship seemed even more wobbly than normal.

“Dominick, I was not able to introduce you before, but this is Finn,” Meria said with a smile.

“Great,” I said, wobbly, walking toward the vile merman. “Let me run you through.” I reached for my belt where I had a dagger, only I couldn't get my hand to reach my belt, or find the dagger.

“Dominick?” Meria asked as she walked to me. “What is wrong?”

“I am fine,” I said, swaying a bit, realizing that being *actually* drunk was rather like swimming, feeling pulled this way and that. I fell against the railing.

“Domnick? Finn, help me!” Meria shouted, and I wanted to believe that concern in her voice was because she loved me, but that was too much to hope for.

I pushed her hands away.

“Do not touch me!” I said a little too loud.

“Dominick, I am only trying to help you.”

“He is beyond help. He is two sheets to the wind,” Sands said, finally beside me. “What?” Meria asked.

“He is bashed–drunk,” Sands kept speaking, and I had no idea where he was, but his voice was annoyingly everywhere.

“I will run him through. See if he can withstand The Cruel Hand.”

“No, you will not,” Meria said, moving her face right before mine. “Dominick?”

“Yes, I will. I hate him.”

“Dominick, you do not know him,” she went on, clearly defending him.

Sands put his arm around me. I wobbled, falling into him.

He grunted.

“Stop blasted moving!” I shouted, but it came out garbled.

“Excuse the captain; he needs a little rest.”

“I do not need rest, I need her.”

“If you do not remove yourself from this situation, you will do something you will hate yourself for.”

Before I knew what was happening, I was in my cabin, alone and with my hand tied to my chair. I had no idea how long I sat there before my head bobbed and blackness surrounded me.

My head felt as if it was about to split in two. The rocking of the ship was not helping. I moved to grab a cloth for my sweaty face, but found that I

was still tied to a chair. What in the life of the Traitor King happened?

"Oh, good, are you sober now? Or are you going to go drink yourself to madness again?" I looked toward the voice and found Sands sitting on the edge of my bed.

"What is going on?"

"You do not remember? Of course, you don't! Blasted fool."

"No–but my head feels as if you hit me with the hilt of your sword," I winced.

"You got blasted *drunk*. I will say it was rather pathetic, really. All this time, you *not* drinking was probably the best thing you have ever done–or not done, I guess. You are a bad drunk, sloppy and foolish."

"What?"

"You drank near an entire bottle of rum, you imbecile!" Sands stood and began walking over to me. "Everything will be ruined if you do things like that!"

"What will be ruined?"

"Your plan–all the progress you have made, and do not forget Meria. You think she likes seeing you that way?"

Meria. She was in love with Finn.

"It doesn't matter what Meria thinks. She is leaving as soon as I help her."

"Leaving to save her people; of course, she is. But you promised to help her find her mother."

"She's leaving with him–*Finn*," I growled.

"Oh, I see, you decided to torture someone for the first time on your own terms and then drink because you are *jealous*?"

"I am no such thing."

"Heartache is the worst sort of pain. You are strong, Nick, but I understand."

"You do not know how I feel, Sands, and I do not feel like speaking of it. Untie me. We need to explore this island before another monster kills us all."

"Like *Jealousy*? That may be the worst monster ever."

I groaned, leaning my head back against the chair I was tied to. "Untie me, Sands."

"I shall only untie you if you will promise not to drink, and promise not to torture anyone, even Finn."

"Blast, Sands!" I cursed.

“I am doing this for your own good.”

“Fine, I shall endure it. Now, get me out of here.”

“Good, Meria is beside herself with worry for you. It took you all night to recover.”

“All night?”

“Yes–you fool,” Sands said as he untied my hands. With the piercing headache I had and my heart still as pained as ever, drinking had solved nothing. I would gladly never drink again, and I could inform anyone who asked, that drinking never healed a painful heart or soul. Which was a pity, because I was not sure I could endure that pain.

I was standing on the deck; Finn was beside Meria, and I tried not to reach out and squeeze the life out of that man who was standing there, destroying my future. Sands poked me in my ribs when I started to take off my gloves.

I could just touch him a little–a little pain; he deserves it.

“Thank you for keeping her safe. I was not sure that you could, or that you were one of the *good* humans, but it is clear to me that you are,” Finn said, and that made me feel completely confused.

“Of course, I kept her safe. She is the most precious treasure aboard my ship!” I grabbed his shirt and pulled him close to my face. “You better keep her safe for the rest of her life, or you will be hunted down by The Cruel Hand,” I snarled, shoving him away.

“Nick,” Sands warned beside me.

I steadied my breathing.

“I am sure she will be rid of me soon. She has asked me to leave her yet again, and everything in Marren is so boring without her,” he said with a chuckle.

I paused and turned around. Meria was smiling at him and rolling her eyes.

Truly? Does he think she is purely for his entertainment?

I wanted to cause him *so much* pain, but only for Meria's sake did I hold back, but I clenched my fists all the same.

"Knock it off, Finn. You have to tell the others, including my sisters and my father."

"I will tell Uncle, but he has been such a shark the last little while without you. He regrets banishing you, I think."

"Uncle?" I asked, looking at them both, back and forth.

"Yes–" Finn said, pulling Meria to his side and kissing her forehead. Meria did not look pleased and shoved him away.

I twitched, not liking that.

"Do not be so flippant with her!" I shouted.

"What?"

"She is a treasure, a gift, and a light; do not treat her so!"

"She knows I love her, my dear, little cousin; I am her favorite relation."

"Maybe," she said with a laugh.

"Favorite mer then?" he interrupted, but I was still trying to wrap my head around one detail that I hoped I had heard correctly. I did not dare to conjure up any hope, though.

"That is accurate," she said with a laugh.

"He is your *cousin*?" I asked Meria.

"Yes, he is. He has been my closest friend and family member all of my life."

The pain constricting my heart, the despair within my soul, in that moment, all but vanished.

This is not her betrothed; she is not going to run off with him.

All I wanted was to pull Meria into my arms and kiss her until all the pains melted away, and all that was left was her–only her, forever and ever. I was a dunce. I assumed too quickly, but was it truly my fault when things did not usually go my way? When the bad was usually the truth?

I smiled for a moment.

She was not in love with Finn.

Is there still a chance that she could be in love with me? For I am, apparently and most deeply and ardently, in love with Meria.

I looked at her, smiled and strode over to stand right before her. She looked up at me with a questioning look. I bent my head down, and I smirked at her until her cheeks darkened. I dipped her down, closed my eyes, took her perfect face in my hands, and kissed her with joy at learning I

had been wrong. I, there and then, released the pure desperation that I had felt during those moments when I believed Meria had chosen someone else. I pulled her back up and heard cheers from behind me. I turned around to see the crew, and Finn, clapping. I pulled away from Meria to address the crew.

"This is my mermaid." But as I was speaking, Meria grabbed onto my jacket and drew my mouth back to hers–her addictive and perfect mouth. I gave her all of me within that kiss and kissed her until I could no longer hear the crew, and all that existed was Meria and me.

I loved that mermaid.

She was going to be mine, forever. I could never give her up, even if her real betrothed came. I would fight to the death for her. She was *my* mermaid, and I was never going to feel what it was like without her, ever again.

Chapter Forty

Meria

"Our captain seems happier than usual this morning. I believe we have you to thank for that. That kiss was something else," Sands said with a chuckle. He walked over to me as I looked out at the island, which once we had crossed over, the Mirror Sea would be revealed to us.

"I doubt that. It has less to do with me, and more that he will find his sister soon."

"No, I am sure you know *why* he is looking for his sister. That could never bring him such joy. This is due to waking up in *your* arms and knowing he has not lost you."

"Lost me?" I asked.

"But be careful, Meria–" Sands began, not answering my question.

"Careful of what?"

"I would like to see you both come back, so be careful on this island. There is something strange about the Mirror Sea."

"You know something?"

"Well–I can sense something."

“The magic?” I asked, surprised that he even knew how to sense magic. I could sense it, too, but that was because I was a magical being. I had been taught that only magical beings could sense magic.

Is it possible that Sands is a magical being? If so, why is he on this ship with pirates?

“Yes,” he answered.

“How can you sense it?”

“We all have our secrets, Meria. Perhaps, I am more than I seem,” he said with a smile.

“What does that mean?”

“I think you know,” he said.

So he is a magical being? Is he an Ancient?

“Are you an Ancient?” I asked with a gasp, my hand over my mouth.

He chuckled, “No–I am *not* an Ancient. Nice guess, but please, do not tell Dominick. I was sent here to help him, and I would like to keep it a secret if at all possible.”

“Why?” I was confused.

“His mother, she has tried time and time again to reach out to him with no luck, so she summoned me.”

“*Summoned* you?”

There was a short pause.

“Have you heard of Jinn?” Sands asked, his voice lowering.

I could not say that I had.

“No, what are Jinn?”

“They are a magical race that live in Sorra, and rarely leave, and if they ever do leave, they hide, and their very existence is kept a secret from most humans.”

“You are one of these *Jinn*?”

“Yes, but do not tell.”

“It is not my place to tell your secret, but Dominick believes his mother abandoned him. You should tell him about his mother.”

“When the time is right. I know what I am doing. Do you?”

“Are you ready?” Dominick asked me, after Sands walked away, leaving me rather rattled. Was Dominick feeling better? I wondered what had come over him, and why had he gotten drunk? I had never seen him drink a single drop the entire time I knew him.

The crew members started to look at us, and Dominick took my hand and pulled me away from them, over to a private area of the ship, near the kitchens.

“I need to tell you–”

“Are you alright? I was so worried about you,” I said, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

“I am a fool, but I am fine.”

“A fool? That is a new one. You have never called yourself that before,” I said with a smile.

“Finn–your cousin–I thought he was your *betrothed*, and after hearing you tell me what your betrothed was like–and your dislike of him–”

“Finn?” I asked, baffled, covering my mouth as I laughed faintly.

“I lost my head. I am so sorry, Meria. I was just trying to protect you.”

“Thank you for caring,” I said.

Was he jealous? Could that mean he feels this something strong building between us, something more than infatuation–something I am afraid to speak out loud.

“I do not want any harm to come to you, Meria,” he said, running a hand over the stubble upon his jaw and chin. “You are *my* mermaid, afterall,” he said with a handsome smirk.

“Yours, huh?” I asked playfully.

“Yes, I mean, you agreed to that when you boarded this ship.”

“Yes–” I said.

“And so, yes. I value what is mine.”

“I mean, I am only temporarily helping you,” I said, a little defeated.

“Well, maybe, we will see about that. But for the moment, I am happy your cousin is your cousin and on his way to help your people. Right now, we have a large task ahead of us, and I need my mermaid at my side.”

“Yes–and my magic.”

“Your magic does come in handy,” he said with a smile.

“And anything else?” I asked for some other reason.

“What?”

“Is there any other reason you were so upset?”

“Meria, now is not the time to talk of feelings. We are about to go onto a strange island with unknown dangers.”

“What better reason than that to reveal one’s feelings, if this is the end,” I said, looking directly into those swirling, blue eyes.

“This is not the end. You’ll be with me, so you will be alright.”

“You can not know that for sure.”

“You doubt my skills at keeping you safe?”

“No.”

“Meria, You know how I feel without even saying it,” he smirked. “Your entire body reacts when I touch you, just as mine does to your touch.”

“I do not,” I gasped, moving away from him.

“You do, indeed, and it is one of my favorite things. Everyone reacts when I touch them, but only you do not writhe in pain. Only you do not scream in agony. Only you touch me freely and never wish to let me go,” he said, reaching for my hand as if to demonstrate.

“Your touch is warm,” I whispered.

“And only *you* say so. Everyone else calls my hand ‘cruel.’” He was still smiling in that playful way. I leaned in closer to him, looking up into his handsome face, those deep eyes. “You enjoy my touch–admit it,” he teased.

“I do not trust myself, sometimes. I always make mistakes.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. You have made far less than I have.”

“Dominick,” I said, and he waited for a few minutes. We just looked at each other in silence, his hand making soothing movements on my skin. I wanted to tell him my feelings, but something held me back. Maybe he was right; we should speak after.

“You know, Meria, you *say* things, even when your voice is silent.”

“So do you,” I whispered back. He smiled and nodded, his head bending closer to me. I knew we had just kissed, but I wished again for those lips to press against mine.

“You want me to tell you something about how I feel?” he asked.

“Yes, I care for you, Dominick, so much. I want to know if you also care for me, too.”

“I do not think a pirate should feel the way that I feel about you. I want to travel these seas with you for the rest of my existence. I want to be the man to make you a mother because you bare *my* children. I want to raise those children beside you–have a dozen if you so wish it. I want to hold you in my arms every single night and wake up beside you. I want to kiss you on every single section of this ship. Does that make it clear?”

I could not believe what I was hearing. *He wants all of that with me? Is it true? Is it possible?* I was just waiting for the *words* to make it even clearer. Those *three* words.

“I–”

“Speak, Meria. I will always listen even if you need time to find the right words.”

“I am afraid. What you said was so wonderful, but–” I didn't finish my thought; I was too afraid.

“Meria–” he said, leaning down to kiss my cheek. “I have never desired anyone like I desire you. I have never kissed anyone else, never dreamed of a future like the one I dream about with you. What else can I say? Tell me how to make it more clear.” He seemed to be begging as he cupped my face between his strong hands.

“I am so sorry, Dominick,” I said, taking a step back. I needed to hear the three words Edmar had never said to me. Those three words I thought I felt for Edmar, but soon had realized it was ridiculous. Did Dominick *love* me? I was not sure I could believe it unless he said it, simply said *it*. Why was it so hard to tell him what I needed? I could have told him I loved him, first. I could have been vulnerable with Dominick; he had been with me.

He cursed and yanked on my shoulder, not roughly, but determined as he pressed my back against the wall. He took one hand and held my waist. With his other hand, he moved from my neck to my chin. I noticed, then, that he was gloveless. He had been taking his gloves off more and more, at least when he was with me.

“You are the only person I’ve ever caressed, and yet I am sure I would never desire to caress any other maiden in all the fathoms below or in the air above. Land or sea, it is only you.” He ran a hand down my braid. “I am

obsessed with this hair of yours; it is wild and beautiful, and only I am able to tame it."

He ran his hand over my waist and up my back, pulling me flush with him. His hand reached up to caress my mouth.

"Your beautiful mouth, Meria. I want you to say what is on your mind, always. Even if we argue, I want you to voice what you want, and I want to spend all of my time giving *that* to you. You sing no song to drag me into the fathoms below, and yet, I wish you would, because I would go wherever you go, even to the ends of Terra and back again, to even the deepest depths of the sea."

"Truly?" I asked with a gasp.

"Yes–is that clear enough for you, Meria?"

"I think so, for the moment," I stammered, his eyes pulling me forward.

"So, are you alright? You understand?" he asked, moving away from me, and I watched as he placed his gloves back on. "We have to go; I need you, Meria."

He had spoken those words many times before, but the way he said it at that time didn't make me feel like he was saying it because he needed my mermaid abilities; he was saying it because he needed *me*.

"I am ready, but I do hope we can converse more, later."

"Yes, then you can tell me exactly what it is you desire from me. Maybe when we return, you will say it," he said with a wicked grin. "Because I know you are not telling me what you want. But I will wait till you do. I may be a pirate, but I can be a patient one."

Chapter Forty-One

Meria

The island was dark as we rowed the small boat across the glassy sea and onto the shore. It was something else, possibly the clouds, causing the depth of darkness. It was only Dominick and me.

"Are you really ready?" he asked.

"Yes–I hope we find your sister."

He nodded and tied the boat to a tree before he nodded in the direction of the jungle to the right.

"It is just through there." Suddenly, as I removed myself from the waves and away from the boat, I collapsed to the ground. My tail shimmered and fell into the wet sand. I moved myself from the sea and waited. It usually only took a few moments to change back into a human.

What is going on?

"Meria–" Dominick began, but then quickly pulled me into his arms. We stood there, our breaths coming in very quickly and our eyes holding each other as we waited for my legs.

"Why are you not changing back?" he whispered.

“I have no idea,” I said, fearful and confused.

Dominick looked around.

I gasped.

He looked at me, confused. “What hurt you?”

“No, Dominick! Your veins–” I said, touching his chest where his shirt was always unbuttoned, showing just a peek of his skin. Without thinking much about it, I began unbuttoning his shirt and gasped. He looked down at himself.

“What is this?” he said, looking at his veinless skin.

“I have no idea. Are you in pain?”

“I feel as I always do. There is a lingering pain, yes.”

“How very strange.”

“It must be something about the island,” Dominick said.

I nodded.

“I will carry you. Maybe my skin and your tail are a result of this island.” He began walking up the beach, toward the jungle.

“It is too far to carry me.”

“I am strong enough, Meria. You weigh very little; it's like carrying a small fish.”

“No, it is not, and do not call me a ‘fish,’ please; you eat fish.”

“But, you are half fish?” he asked with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Still, I am mer. Call me a dolphin if anything; they are more comparable.”

He just chuckled. Luckily, the island was small, and in only a few minutes, twenty or so, we came upon what had to be the Mirror Sea. Its name was perfectly fitting. I did not know what we were looking for, or what was so special about the Mirror Sea, but I assumed Dominick did.

There before us stood a perfectly circular body of water. The depths seemed dark, and yet within them, there were millions of stars, sparkling. No waves lapped upon the shore, for there was no sand. Only rocks surrounded it, like a large pool. The surface was incredibly still, just like a mirror. As we moved closer, it was hard to tell where the starry sky ended and the Mirror Sea began.

“It is incredible,” I gasped.

“Truly, it is,” Dominick said, looking at the pool, then over to me. “I believe my sister could be here, somewhere. The Mirror Sea could give me the answer to where she really is.”

“How?”

“There is a legend about this place. It is said that if you capture a star from the Mirror Sea, you will be granted the desire of your heart.”

“The desire to find your sister!” I said with a smile.

“Yes, I have searched every sea and kingdom for her, and when I learned about the Misted Seas, I thought that she had to be here, and although she may be hidden well here on some island, coming here might help me locate her,” Dominick said.

“Wow, that is so wonderful.”

“It can help you, too, possibly help you find your mother, tell you if she is truly in Walden, or how to save your people,” Dominick said with excitement.

“Truly?”

“Yes, if that is the desire of your heart,” he said with a gentle smile.

I wanted to save my people, wanted to find my mother, but shamefully, I was not sure it was the current, greatest desire of my heart.

“Shall we get the answers we seek? We must meet with the protector of the sea, first.”

“Who is the protector of the sea?” I asked.

Dominick set me down on a rock and pulled out his map from his back pocket.

“Here, it is a drawing of a dragon.”

“A dragon!” I gasped. I knew very little about Dragons, only that they were some of the oldest magical beings in existence, even older than the Ancients.

“Yes, if we ripple the water, the dragon is supposed to come and tell us what to do to gain our desires. I will learn where my sister is, and you will learn how to save your people.”

I nodded. Yes, I wanted to save them. I loved my people. I focused on them as Dominick picked me up again, and we moved to the edge of Mirror Sea.

Looking over the edge of the rocks and down into the depths, it seemed *so* deep.

I looked at Dominick.

“You should go first. You have wanted this far longer than I have,” I said.

“No. You go first, Meria.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said tenderly. He sat down beside me, and I took his hand in mine as I leaned over. I felt him squeeze it as I dipped my hand into the water, watching the once still pool ripple and warp, the stars sparkling within it.

“Think of your intent; hold it there in your heart,” he whispered.

I thought of my people, thought of my family, my sisters, and my nieces, nephews, Finn and Dominick. Dominick, his painful, hurting eyes, his furrowed brow, the scar on his cheek from his father, the black veins that drained the happiness from him, the blasted curse I wanted to save him from, the light in his eyes when he looked at me. I loved his smirky pirate smile, the golden earring in his ear, the fathoms within his eyes. I loved the way he always protected me and the others he cared about, and those precious memories of the cave, him saving me and helping me when I was so afraid.

He was good. He was so good.

“Sea Princess.”

‘I looked from the water, and then pulled back. Moving along the surface of the sea was a huge silver dragon. His scales reflected like a thousand stars in the moonlight. His wings spread out wide in the water on either side of him.

“Dragon?” I asked as he reached us, his head just barely above the water.

“You have come to receive the answer to the desires of your heart.”

“I have, wise dragon,” I said gently. The dragon lifted himself, and it was then I saw that he was a dragon *serpent* as he curled and lifted himself out of the water, his large wings moving, creating more ripples in the pool below.

“What is the desire of your heart?” he roared.

“To save my people. How can I save them?”

“The Mirror Sea is a reflection of who we are. It teaches us. What have you seen within it?”

“I have not–”

“Dip your hand inside again, Sea Princess.”

I reached down again and touched the water. Dominick flooded through my mind, and I tried to focus on my family and my people. I removed my other hand from his and pushed both hands inside the pool. Still, my thoughts pointed to him.

“That is not the desire–”

“The pool reveals, Sea Princess.”

“But I need help with my people.”

“You must choose a star from the depths. Choose a star, and bring it to the surface; then you shall know what you seek.” The dragon dove into the water. I removed my hands from the pool and leaned back. Dominick was there, and I leaned against his chest.

“Dive to the bottom. You can do it easily enough,” he said with a smile.

“Dominick?” I said, shaking.

If I do not find out how to save my people, they will all die. How can my heart be so selfish and think more about Dominick than my people?

“Meria, are you alright?”

“I believe so.”

“Take your time,” he said, caressing my shoulder.

I removed myself from Dominick and shook my head. I thought of Finn, my sisters, my people, Dominick, his lost family, his mother, and all the pain he had endured. No matter how hard I tried, he was right there, the main focus. Without thinking anymore about it, I dove into the Mirror Sea.

The warm water of the mirror sea was soothing. As I moved deeper and deeper, trying to reach the stars that dotted the bottom of the seabed, I tried hard to focus on my people, but my mind kept showing me Dominick.

Once I reached the bottom, it was then I realized that the entire seabed was made of nothing but those stars. As I moved to grab one, it darkened before me. Again and again, I moved and attempted to touch those stars. Finally, I moved my hand over another, and it glowed. Touching its edges, I thought of my family, of my people, but to my left, there was another star that began to flicker, then glow brighter. I moved to it, touching it, and Domnick came into my mind. I touched it and felt love pour from me to him. I saw a life that could be mine, a life that I had desired above all else for all of my life. Dominick was there with a smile on his face, and two small children were sitting upon his knees. One was playing with his golden earring, and he laughed, tickling them; the other was giggling. I came up from behind him, carrying another child, a sweet, little, chubby infant with blue eyes, just like Dominick’s. A family with beautiful children. I noticed, then, that we were on the deck of a ship. I watched another scene where Dominick was beside me as we swam in a cove, our children swimming around us; they were mer. Their tails flashed in the sunlight. I laughed as

Dominick wrapped his arms around me, and one of our children splashed us with her tail.

I wanted that.

I removed my hand from the star and paused.

What is this? Why are there two stars that call to me? Can I take them both? Get answers about my people and know if this is a life I could have with Dominick? It was my dream to have what I saw there. I picked up the star and swam back to the other. I picked it up, and nothing flashed before me. I just had a feeling that it contained hope for my people. I swam up toward the surface, but it seemed the closer and closer I came to the surface, the heavier the two stars became. I paused. If they kept becoming heavier and heavier, I would have to leave one behind. I continued swimming, pulling them both into my arms, using my tail to power me through the water as best I could, but I was barely moving.

"Dragon!" I called out into the fathoms. In an instant, the dragon appeared beside me, his body was so large, as if three whales had lined up.

"Sea Princess, what do you choose?"

"I need answers to both, Dragon."

"Only one star is yours to claim."

"But, I need to know."

"Look inside, Sea Princess. You know more than you realize."

"What does that mean?"

"Your love for your people, your desire to help them does you great credit. You are more selfless than most who have dived into this sea."

"Please, tell me how to save my people."

"You know how to save your people."

It was then that I realized that I did know. I knew it as soon as I had risen out of the sea and grew legs.

"We were never meant to stay in the depths of the sea," I whispered.

"You are wise, young one."

I looked at the star and saw our people living both on Marren Island as well as within the sea; hope bloomed inside of me.

"But my father–"

"Stubbornness afflicts many, even in the dragon realms."

"If we rise, humans will not come for us?" I asked.

"Some humans may, but the world is a better place than it was when your people went into the fathoms, long ago."

“Thank you, dragon.”

“So what will you do?” He nodded to the two stars I was still holding.

“Was this not you revealing my deepest desires to me?”

“This is not your deepest desire. You already know that answer. You are still deserving of one star. You must take that star to the surface.” Then the dragon curled and swam into the depths.

I slowly dropped the star that I had found first, with the truths about my people I had already learned for myself and watched as it sank to the depths below. I cradled the other star in my hands, my thoughts racing, wondering about Dominick, about a future with him, about the possibility of him being free of his curse, of us being a family, the family I had always wanted. I smiled and gripped it tight in my hand and began my swim, once again, up to the surface. Yet back down in the depths, there was another star, growing brighter and brighter, and I could not ignore it, so I swam back down to it and picked it up, placing mine upon the seabed.

As I touched the new star, lights flashed in my eyes, and I saw Dominick as a child, sitting beside his mother, his little brother so small. I saw another flash, and his sister was locked away–high away. Another flash, and Dominick was walking into Walden, speaking to his mother; she wept at his feet. I let go of the rock. Was that Dominick’s greatest desire? I saw another star alight. I moved to pick it up.

In another flash, pain flowed through me; it was as if I was Dominick. He clenched his fists, looking at those veins. I watched as a vision of myself walked up to him, kissed him as tears fell down my cheeks; then my legs grew solid–permanent. I gasped, almost dropping the star, but Dominick pulled away. The pain was gone. All the dark veins were gone. The scar on his cheek had healed. He looked at me, and then at himself. I wrapped my hands about his neck and kissed him soundly.

I dropped the star. Three stars gleaming at the bottom of the sea.

One was a life with Dominick, and the family I always wanted.

One was Dominick reuniting with his family.

And the last one, was me breaking his curse. Although there had been no words, I knew from the images within that star that, somehow, I would sacrifice my tail to break his curse. I drained all of my magic and poured it all into him with that kiss and with those tears. I had become merely human, and he had been freed.

“You must choose one. When you do, you will forget about the other stars you have seen,” the sea dragon's voice echoed through the water.

If I chose to break his curse, to bring that knowledge to the surface, Dominick would still be able to choose his desire, so he would not only be reunited with his mother, but he would have no curse. That was the only option. I reached for it, picking it up.

“That is not your desire to choose,” the dragon rumbled.

“It is here, and I desire it.”

“If you can remove it from the pool, it is yours.”

The longer I swam, the heavier and heavier it became. I was determined, but was struggling more than I could admit to myself at that moment. I looked up toward the surface, and I thought about Dominick. I closed my eyes and swam harder than I had ever swam before. In what felt like hours, my head finally broke through the water, and I panted, my body exhausted, but I made it to the rocks. Dominick was there, and helped pull me from the water. As soon as I sat upon the rocks, I felt my energy slowly coming back to me.

“You did it. Are you alright? You were down there for so long.”

I looked up at Dominick whose face was above me. I smiled, looking into those blue eyes, glancing at his scar. Soon, his scar and all his pain would be gone. I smiled again. Then, I gasped, seeing the rising sun behind us. I sat up.

“Oh, no!”

“What is the matter?” he asked.

I pointed to the sky.

“It’s alright.”

“But you did not get to go,” I said.

“I can tonight,” he said with a smile.

“I am sorry, Dominick.”

“Do not be.” It was then that even though I felt my strength coming back to me, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Forty-Two

Dominick

I had never really felt fear before like the fear I felt while waiting for Meria to rise from the Mirror Sea. She was a mermaid, so I did not understand why she did not swim faster out of the depths. Had she drowned? I was about to enter the sea when the dragon appeared.

"You must not intervene. She is finding the truth she seeks."

"Is she alright?" I asked the dragon.

"She is safe, human prince."

I looked back into the water, only seeing the glimmering starlights shining. She was invisible to me.

"Why have you come here, prince?" I heard the dragon again. "I seek answers to the greatest desire of my heart."

"What is that desire?" I looked into the dragon's eyes and tried as hard as I could to focus on my sister. I had never even seen her before, but I imagined a silhouette of a woman–a girl–lost, alone, and afraid.

"That is not your greatest desire, prince."

“I wish to find my sister, to see my mother, and make her pay for what she did.”

“Should she pay? You are the Crown Walden Prince. You should be on the throne; it lacks a king.”

“I am cursed.”

“Most human royals are–as is your sister, whom you seek.”

“Yes, but the things I have done.”

“What have you done?” he asked. His words curled around me like smoke.

“I hurt people, I said.

“Lies! Human, do not tell lies to me. I know that you were forced. That is on someone else,” he growled.

“I killed my father!” I shouted.

“You believe this?”

“It is the truth.”

“Is it?” he asked.

“I came here for answers, not to be asked questions,” I said, the memory of my mother, the pain on her face, taking over my thoughts.

“You must choose a star, and your greatest desire will be revealed, and the answer you seek will be given.”

“I know that I want Meria, and I know that I killed my father.”

“One is true; the other a lie.”

“Which one?”

“You already know.

“How can it be a lie?” I asked in pain.

I suddenly remembered my uncle's vile words to me after I had been imprisoned on his ship because, at first, I refused to hurt people with my curse when Veeto ordered me to do it.

“YOU KILLED HIM! You killed my brother–your own father! You are wicked, just as wicked as King Falcon!”

I shook, tears streaming down my face.

“No, I didn’t. It was an accident!” I cried.

“You did it because you are corrupt; only darkness resides inside of you,” Veeto bellowed.

I then remembered a faint voice, one that had once been so familiar to me; then, another memory came to me, one which I was not certain was an actual memory or just a made-up fantasy, one to keep me sane, during those hard times of my young life.

"I love you, Dominick; this is not your fault. You are good, and I love you," a woman, I believed to be my mother, whispered.

"Do you remember the truth?" The dragon pulled me back to the present. The echoes of the past faded like a distant mist.

"No–I did kill him; whoever that was lied to me to make me stop my crying," I said.

"You did use your curse on him; that much is true. You did cause him pain, but you were also a child, and the Creator had already counted your father as one of His creations whose time had come to leave this existence and enter His Ancient Lands *before* you ever touched him."

"How–"

"This is not news; *she* told you–"

"To protect me."

"No, she spoke the truth."

"But she sent me away. She abandoned me."

"Truth stands the tests of this world. It stands when all else bends and falls. Truth rings true in your soul, human prince."

"So–I did *not* kill my father?"

"Did you?"

"No?" I said, and then I looked at my hands, hands I had always hated, hands that had placed me into a life that I'd never wanted.

"No, young prince, you did not kill your father."

"I did not kill my father," I said faintly, and as I spoke those words, something inside of me, inside of my soul, hummed–it hummed to the truth of those words.

"Tomorrow night, you shall choose a star, and then you will discover truths that you have never known, along with the deepest desire of your heart."

"But wait!"

The dragon had already begun to sink under the sea.

He paused.

“But my sister?”

“Your sister is alive and on the life journey the Creator has set out for her. No matter what Ancient Draken does, the Creator will see to it that every being, magical or otherwise, has the opportunity to *be* who He created them to *be*.”

“But she needs me.”

“Does she? Or do you only feel an obligation? Or only a desire for your mother not to turn you away when you go back to Walden?”

“Isn't it my obligation? Do I not need my sister to be able to see my mother and ask her what I seek to know?”

“It is not.” Then without another word, he sank into the sea.

I fell back against the rocks. Only a few minutes later, Meria broke the surface of the water and held up a gleaming star in her hand. I reached out and pulled her from the sea as it seemed she was very tired.

After I pulled her out, and as she fell asleep to the rising light in the sky, I felt a tightness inside of me which I had never felt before.

I had not killed my father. My hands had never actually killed. Yes, I had caused immense and torturous pain, but I had never killed anyone. I smiled and caressed Meria’s face with my glove free hand. Maybe, my hands could bring comfort; maybe, I was not as corrupt as I believed.

There was a weight off of my shoulders and chest that I had never realized had even been there. Even if I never broke my curse, I knew that it did not affect Meria. We could still live a happy life. Maybe, we could sail the seas together. I paused in my musings as Meria stirred beside me. Hours passed, but time seemed so different on that island.

“Dominick?” she asked, sitting up, still clutching the star in her hands.

“Hello, there. Have a nice rest?” I asked with a smile.

“What happened?” she asked me, moving her tail a little, shifting on the rocks.

“You came from the sea and fell asleep. Did it work? Did you find the answer you needed?”

“Yes, the answer is within this star.”

She held it up, and its powerful glow surprised me.

“Is it warm?” I asked as she moved closer.

“Feel it–” she said, holding it out to me.

“That is yours, Meria.”

“Come on, Dominick,” she said, pushing it closer to me.

I touched the warm rock, and a vision fell in front of my eyes.

Free of my curse, Meria and I swam in a lagoon, small children, mermaids like Meria, swam about us. I kissed her cheek, and one child swam up to me with blue eyes, like mine, and with Meria's beautiful blond hair.

"Father, watch!" the little girl said, jumping from the water. Another image flashed before me; five little heads tucked into five beds on a swaying ship. I turned to Meria who stood beside me, her finger pressed to her lips.

"Do not wake them," she said softly.

I nodded, extinguished a candle, and then moved from the room. We walked down a corridor and entered a room–our room.

Meria sank onto the bed and pulled me to her. I kissed her mouth and warmth flowed through me. I moved my hands to her cheeks; there was no darkness in my veins–no pain in my soul–only happiness and light.

How I ached for that. How I wanted that desire of my soul, which burned so brightly within me. I pulled back from the stone with a gasp.

Meria's eyes were wide as she let the star drop from her hand and tumble between us.

"What was that?" I asked, gasping and looking into her eyes. Back and forth, I searched. *Had she seen what I just saw?*

"I did not see anything. What did you see?" she asked.

"I saw a future I greatly desire," I said faintly with a roughness to my words.

"That future you saw within the star is within your grasp." We both turned to see the dragon before us.

"You, Dominick, can have that future, but only if you trust completely and believe you deserve such a life."

"But how?" I asked as the dragon seemed to move away.

"All you need is here." He looked between the two of us.

I turned to look at Meria.

"I will say–I have never had two souls come to the Mirror Sea's edge, and both have the *same* deepest desire. I do believe that with what you two have, there is the possibility that soul-songs will return to Terra, for yours is an exceptionally strong and powerful *true love."*

"What is a *soul-song*?" I asked.

“Ask the sea princess; she knows of the magic that humans have forgotten about. Now, human prince, you will forget what Meria’s star just showed you, as it is *her* chosen desire.”

I felt a bit dizzy. “What were we talking about?” I was a bit confused.

“Never mind. Now, dive in, Dominick, and claim your star.”

I looked at Meria, smiled, took off my coat and vest, along with my boots and sword, then dove in. The water was warm, and I swam in it with no need to come to the surface for air. I swam deep, seeing so many stars glistening at the sea’s floor.

How will I know the right one to pick?

I found one that seemed to be pulsating and swam over to it, picking it up.

It was an image of my mother, her arms wrapped around me, and Peter beside us with a large grin. It was all I had ever wanted: to be wanted and loved by my mother. Another rock glistened, catching my attention, and I swam over to it. It was an image of the underwater Kingdom of Marren. I saw mermaids dive in and out of the sea from Marren Island. They were happy. Meria was there, swimming beside an older mermaid who had the same color tail as she did.

“Mother–” she said with a smile to the mermaid.

“We are free! Here, we shall stay both on land and in the sea!” I heard shouts and Meria and her mother, and so many mermen and mermaids were out of the sea, cheering.

I felt it more than actually hearing it that the freedom of existing on both land and in the sea was what would save her people; they needed to rise. I turned around, confused, because that was not the desire Meria had chosen? Had she not wanted to reunite with her mother? Why had she not taken it?

“Dragon!” I called, and he appeared beside me within a mass of bubbles. “Why is this still here? This is what Meria wanted.”

“Is it? She looked at that one and then put it back.”

“She put it *back*?”

“Yes, she found a desire much greater.”

I dropped the rock with my mother and brother and clasped Meria’s rock in my palm.

“Would you take her desire?”

“Yes, she deserves to have it.”

“It is not yours to take, but if you can pull it from the depths, you may have it.” Then in another flurry of bubbles, the sea dragon was gone, and I was left alone within the depths of the dark water.

There was no choice; Meria’s happiness was more important than mine. I began to swim. The star became heavier and heavier the higher I swam, but I was determined. I would do it and more for Meria. Finally, I burst through the surface, exhausted, my arms and legs aching, but I was, of course, used to pain, and I pushed it aside. I swam to the edge of the sea and pulled myself out, beside Meria.

“Are you alright? You were down there for a long time,” Meria asked.

I noticed then that it was almost morning. Time was different under the Mirror Sea.

“I am well; I got it,” I said, holding up the glowing star. She smiled, and before I could say anything else, the dragon spoke.

“You are both most deserving, pure in heart, and filled with a love so true that you have endless possibilities,” he said; then he was gone, and the ripples soon dissipated, bringing back the sea’s smooth surface.

“What does that mean?” Meria asked, picking up her glowing star.

“I am not sure.”

“Let's get back to the ship. I do not want the crew to start worrying about us.”

I reached for her hand, and she took it.

“Okay, let’s head back.” I picked Meria up into my arms. “Have I ever told you that your tail is the most beautiful color? It reminds me of the sea. It suits you so perfectly.”

“Truly?” she asked, and I could see the surprise in her eyes.

“Yes, is that so hard to believe?”

“In Marren, I was forced to wear dressings over my tail to hide the color.”

“What? Why?” I asked, pausing for a moment in my walking, baffled that anyone would make her do such a thing.

“I got this tail color from my mother; she was banished years ago, and so the tail color serves as a reminder of her banishment and shame. It is a rare color. I am the only one in our kingdom with this particular shade.”

“Meria, it is beautiful. That is awful that you were made to feel bad for it.”

“Yes, thank you. I do not believe my mother was a traitor. I believe, like me, she was only trying to save my people.”

“You are like her, then.”

“I am, and while that would have at one point been an insult, I do not think that anymore.”

“I will be proud to meet her, when I help you find her.”

“I know how to save my people, even without my mother, although I do wish to see her.”

“How?”

“We must rise,” she said. “Rise from the sea and embrace what we are. I always knew but was too afraid to voice it.”

“And what are you and your people?”

“Half human,” she said with a smile, pressing her cheek against my chest. I began to walk again, enjoying her in my arms. She was safe. No one could hurt her when I held her. It was silent for a time as we slowly wove our way back through the trees and onto the beach.

Had the star I pulled from the Mirror Sea worked already? I smiled, happily, but wondered what star and desire she had chosen. I hoped that with it, she would get exactly what she desired. She deserved to receive everything. As we walked to the boat, there was a woman standing there right near the shore. We froze as we reached her.

“Princess Meria, Prince Dominick,” she said with a nod. “I am Ancient Celia. I am here to tell you, Meria, that your mother has dwelt in Walden all these years. She lives a happy but rather simple life.”

“So, she *is* in Walden?” Meria gasped.

“Yes, and she has been waiting for her appointed time when she will come back to her people. No matter the fool your father is, your mother is strong in the ways of the Ancients. We have blessed her for her bravery all those years ago.”

“Can I see her?” Meria asked.

“She will come to you and to your people when she is needed most, as should all magical beings. The time is near when she will return to Marren. You will know her when you see her. Listen to your soul, Meria. It will not lead you astray; your soul is strong, a gift from the Creator to help save your people.”

“My mother is needed now, I need her,” Meria whispered, and it pained me to hear the sorrow and need in her voice.

“All I can say is that you will see her soon, young princess. She will be there for you in the very moment you need her most,” the Ancient said,

looking from Meria to me. “Keep her safe, and do not be afraid to speak from your heart, young prince.”

With a snap of her fingers and a shimmer of glittering smoke, she was gone.

“That was not the star I took,” Meria said, lifting up her star and looking at it to be sure.

Did I tell her that I selected that star? My star reunites her with her mother and saves her people. I thought for a moment.

“Let’s get back to the ship,” I said, taking her hand in mine. She looked at me and nodded.

Chapter Forty-Three

Meria

For the next few days, as we traveled back toward Pixie Isle, Dominick kept himself busy and was mostly with the crew. We had placed the two stars, side by side, in his captain's cabin, and each night as I fell asleep to the glow of them there, I yearned to discover what his desire was. Had he been the reason Ancient Celia appeared and told me of my mother? That she told us that my people would be safe? It wasn't me. If so, why would he do that? He wanted to find his sister. Would it be wrong to touch his star and find out? I could not bring myself to do it. Did he know where his sister was?

I could feel his eyes upon me every day. Our eyes connected, but we never seemed to have enough time or were never in the right place at the same time to say whatever it was we needed to say, freely. What was his desire? I was still a coward, however, because I did not ask.

Does he make himself busy on purpose? I wondered. I knew he was not one to talk much about his feelings, but I did not want to be the first one to broach the topic. I was not sure, but I was buzzing with energy to try to

figure that out, to speak with him about my heart. Perhaps, it was nothing at all to do with me, and he was only anxious to get back to Pixie Isle and find Peter.

The day we returned to Pixie Isle, I remained aboard the ship, along with half of the crew. Dominick left in search of Peter.

After a very short time, there was a loud commotion, and I left my quarters to go up on deck, and I saw five boats, all filled with children, leaving the isle, on their way to the boat. The children were cheering. I searched the boats for Peter and Dominick. Then I spotted them on the last boat.

I got to work as soon as the first load of children came aboard. I found extra blankets and had the cook give them hot meals. They were all led into the captain's cabin.

How were there so many children on Pixie Isle? There were children so small, from only one moon cycle old, which I realized the humans called a year, to others in their teens. They were all covered in leaves and dirt. Instead of being fearful of me, a stranger, the children rushed to me.

"Mother! I knew I always had a mother!" They all called as they fell into my arms. I wept with them, hoping my magic could take away whatever pain they had endured on that island. Five children fell asleep on my lap, and I did not dare move. I stroked their hair away from their faces and pulled a coat over them, hoping they could rest well. My heart ached for those beautiful children who did not deserve whatever it was they had endured within the realm of those strange pixies. When the door opened, and as I was starting to nod off, myself, I turned to see Dominick and Peter smiling at me, but Peter had a maiden on his arm, who was also smiling.

Is this Gwendolyn?

She was the first human female I had ever seen. She wore a long dress; it was dirty as was her face and hands, but her hair was a beautiful shade of

dark blond, and it was held back with a ribbon. She had a sweetness about her, which I sensed.

"How are they?" the maiden asked me, crouching down beside one child who held onto my leg, pushing back his hair.

"They are relieved to be saved. What happened on that isle?" I asked.

"The pixies had good intentions when they took all the children. They believed that they were helping them by removing them from what the pixies believed to be difficult situations, and by causing them to forget their troubles, and by giving them a life of fun and play, but everyone needs a mother, and when the pixies realized that, they brought me to this place to be their mother. Peter pretended to be their father for the past few days to get us out of that mess," she laughed. "But they need their *real* mothers and fathers."

"That is why they took you?" I whispered, looking from her to the precious sleeping children.

"I believe so. As soon as I arrived, the children swarmed me and called me 'mother,'" Gwendolyn said. "I could not deny these children; they had little to nothing." She wiped a tear from her face.

"We saved them, Gwendolyn; they are safe," Peter said, placing a hand on her back.

"Yes, you are right; it has been a difficult time," she said, still looking at one of the young ones.

"Of course, I am so sorry, Gwen," Peter said with a frown. Gwendolyn patted his leg and stood, straightening her rather dirty skirts.

"I am Gwendolyn Darling, and who are you?"

"I am Meria."

"Lovely to meet you." Gwendolyn bent down, and then stood up straight.

"Thank you for saving me, Peter," Gwendolyn said sweetly.

Peter bent down and lifted her chin to kiss her, rather deeply. Dominick laughed, and they broke apart.

"Seems you and her are not *only* friends?" Dominick chuckled.

"Yes–well, I discovered a few things, like Pixies are vile and rather ignorant, and Gwendolyn is the most beautiful and wonderful maiden in all the lands. What about you? Are you and Meria still friends, or did you, finally, see reason, Dom?"

"Peter," Gwendolyn scolded.

"Do not worry, Dominick needs pestering."

“I do not speak of emotions,” Dominick said, turning from Peter.

“But if you did–you would say it was her?” I heard Peter ask as he was still looking at Dominick. “I am excited to have half-mer nieces and nephews.”

“Peter!" Gwendolyn scolded again.

“What?”

“I should have remembered how annoying you always were. It has really been nice without you here,” Dominick grumbled.

“You missed me,” Peter said with a laugh,

“I am not sure I did. It is nice to have *you* here, Gwendolyn.” Dominick nodded to her.

“I do not understand. Why are their parents not searching for them?” I asked, looking again at the children.

“Pixie dust. The pixies cover their tracks by sprinkling this dust over the children’s families before they take them away, and the families forget, forget about their children,” Gwendolyn said, sadly.

“They forget that they have children? That is frightening,” I whispered.

“Don't worry, I charmed the pixies. They love me now, and we have an agreement,” Peter said with a puffed out chest. “These children will be safe and will be reunited with their families, who will remember them upon their return.

“Really? What *agreement* did you make with those unstable creatures?” Dominick asked.

“Really. The agreement is mine and mine alone thank you. But really is of little concern. Like I said, they are dimwitted,” Peter said, pulling Gwendolyn into his arms from behind and walking with her, very awkwardly, across the room to the door, and then they left.

Dominick chuckled, and the lightness of it was so beautiful.

My eyes locked onto his.

“I know we must speak, Meria. Thank you for being patient,” he said, touching the scruff of his jaw.

“Of course.”

“But, I promised if you helped me through these seas, I would help you find your mother, and I will keep my promise. I know that Ancient Celia said that your mother would come to you when you need her most, but I will stay with you till you are reunited with her, and make sure you are safe.”

“Thank you. What about your sister? Do you know where she is?” I asked. Needing to know if he finally received the answer to that question, what he had been wanting the entire time.

“No, I do not. I am no longer searching for her. We will arrive at Marren Island tomorrow. After that, I can take you wherever you desire to go,” Dominick said; then he walked over to me, picking up one of the little girls attached to my leg and tucked her into the bed. I watched in silence as he cared for those little children and placed them side by side in the bed. He walked back to me and reached out his hand to help me up. He wore gloves, and I took his gloved hand in mine.

“Those children are too cute for their own good,” he said with a chuckle. “I have not spent much time with children, but I have taken away pain from many children. I will gladly do so again tomorrow.”

“I healed them; I could not stand the pain in their eyes,” I told him.

Dominick nodded. “You should get some sleep, then, Meria. I am sure you are exhausted,” he said, caressing my face. It was the first time since the Mirror Sea that he had touched me like that, and I craved more.

All the answers I had ever searched for could only be given to me by him. Of course, I wanted to find my mother, but I wanted to have a future with that man. I wanted to be his. But I could not speak up and say those words. He took his hands out of mine and brushed some hair from my cheek. Then he lifted one hand and reached into his pocket. He held up a teal colored seashell.

“I found this, it reminded me of your tail. I remember you saying that you collected seashells,” he said, clearing his throat, looking a little uncomfortable.

“I do, I love it,” I said, taking the pretty shell from him with a gleaming smile.

“Beautiful,” he said with a nod. He cleared his throat again. “Once we face the rest of these treacherous waters, we shall converse more, I promise. I only need a little more time to gather my thoughts. I am not used to sharing things,” he said, clenching and unclenching his gloved hands.

“I understand. Thank you for telling me. I am willing to help you if you ever need me. We can figure it all out together.”

“I will always need you, Meria. Do not doubt that.”

Then before I could say anything else, he turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter Forty-Four

Meria

We arrived at Marren Island the next morning as Dominick had promised. But Marren Isle did not look the same. At least, the waters around it had changed. Mermaids and mermen–my people–were there, playing openly in the waves during the daytime. None of them had ventured onto the island, but they had risen up within the bay. I wondered if the Marren Lights had gone out during my absence, or if my people finally believed what my Mother, Finn, and I had told them. I moved to the front of the ship where Dominick stood at the wheel.

"I can stay back and anchor here, but the men have already seen them."

"Do you think they will hurt my people?" I asked, a little afraid.

"If they dare, they shall be ripped in two," Dominick said with a smile. Although it was a dark comment, I could not help but laugh. The Cruel Hand was *not* Dominick. His threats were only that–threats.

"Thank you," I said, touching his cheek. I knew what I had to do. I was going to talk with my father and make sure that my people knew what would save them, permanently. I also needed to say 'goodbye' to my family,

and *goodbye* to my mermaid life. I wanted to save Dominick from his curse, and that would leave me, forever, as a human. As I looked at Dominick, I knew that it would be worth it. I did not want to be a mermaid if it meant Dominick would never have the chance to be free. I could live the rest of my life as a human and be just fine. I liked having legs, I liked being with Dominick, and that felt like where I truly belonged. I would still be able to swim in the sea, although in shallower waters and for shorter periods of time, but that was okay. The sacrifice was worth it. My greatest desire to have a family with Dominick was worth it.

Before I could say anything, I dove into the sea and over to my people, toward freedom for both Dominick and myself, and for my people.

Chapter Forty-Five

Dominick

"Why are you so irritated?" I turned to see Peter and Sands on my right side. Great, they were teaming up against me. "There is a distance between you two," Peter expressed, speaking of Meria and myself.

"We need to speak about a few things, but I have not had the time to think."

"Emotions–they have never been his strong suit," Sands said, crossing his arms. "It's clear you love her. What is holding you back?"

"Sands, not now."

"No, truly brother, What is holding you back from happiness; your curse? I'd never let a thing like that affect my feelings for someone," Peter said, wiggling his eyebrows. Peter's curse, while not pleasant, was a far cry better than mine. I looked at both of them, and I knew that I held strong feelings for Meria, more than I did for anyone else. I knew I wanted a life with her, everything with her, and yet something was holding me back from being fully open about it. Perhaps because my past was so much darker than Meria's, I did not want to dim her light. Or maybe I did not want to feel

vulnerable. I had always played a part, but with Meria, it was real, and something about that made me take a step back. Before Meria, my life was mostly an act.

"I am fine," I said, watching Meria as she swam through the sea with the other mermaids. I then watched as they all turned their backs to her.

Is that because of her banishment? I asked myself. I clenched my jaw and glared down at them. *How dare they treat her with such little respect*.

"Ah, afraid she will fall for a merman?" Sands said with a chuckle, reading me wrong entirely.

I wanted to punch him.

"Shove off," I said. He had no idea that I did have a slight fear that her betrothed would capture her attention again.

"Gah, you are so frustrating," Peter said with a sigh.

"What?"

"Go to her–tell her how you feel, you big dolt. It is not so deep and complicated. I can coach you, help you know the right things to say, if you want. I am good with ladies," Sands said. It was as if Peter and Sands had become friends and with one plan, to force me to spill my guts to Meria.

"Excuse me?" I growled at Sands, then glared at Peter.

Peter held up his hands. "Hey, just because you are not a mermaid, does not mean you cannot swim. Didn't Meria say her father and the mer were afraid of humans? Maybe you could change their minds," Peter said as Sands nodded, wiggling his irritating eyebrows at me as he opened his eyes wide. I was going to punch Peter, then Sands, and I would have a pleasant time doing it.

I hated when Sands was right, but it was even worse when Peter, my newly rediscovered brother, was right. I shoved Sand's shoulder and moved away from the wheel.

"Steer that for me, will you?" I said to Sands.

"Are we not anchored?" he asked.

"Just stay here," I said, taking off my jacket, belt, and then my sword. I tugged off my boots and looked out at the sea. The mermaids were crowded around Meria, as if they were listening to her. I turned to look at my brother.

"Keep the ship a good distance away."

Then, I dove into the sea.

Chapter Forty-Six

Meria

I heard the whispers, first. The splashing stopped as the mer froze in order to stare at me; then many turned their backs to me. I looked around, searching for any familiar face, and then I saw Finn. He motioned to the right, and I saw my father, reclining, half submerged upon a rock, beside the rest of my family. I swam faster to reach them and passed by more mer, who upon seeing me, turned their backs, also. That was what we did to *traitors* of our kind. When I was at the base of the rock, I rose to the surface.

"Father!" I called, and there was a silence that followed. My father, eventually, turned to look down on me from the rock.

"Meria?" he asked as if confused.

"Father, our people were never meant to stay under the sea, forever."

"Finn told us to relay that message from you, Meria!" my sister called from beside my father. "I guess Mother and you both told us."

"Sirens are a real threat," my other sister said.

"Are the lights still burning?" I asked my father.

“The last one still flickers, barely, but we have lost all else,” Father said. “We can no longer survive in the Marren depths.

“The Ancients set the Marren Lights there to burn bright for us until the time came for us to rise. When the first light went out, that was our sign to leave,” I said. “I am glad that you all have risen. This is what we should have done long ago.”

“She speaks the truth.”

I paused to see Ancient Celia in a long silver dress, standing on a nearby rock. There was a light that radiated from her. “I am Ancient Celia, the Ancient who first brought you the lights. They were only ever intended to be temporary. I am surprised that this information was lost by your kind.”

“It was not lost–only not believed,” my father said, and I could hear the quiver in his voice.

We revered the Ancients.

“You should have believed your Queen, whom the Creator called to guide you out of the seas. Had you listened to her, so many of the mer who have died or worse, have become sirens, would have been saved and still with you to this day.”

“It was forbidden,” Father argued.

Celia ignored Father; then she continued. “Then, your daughter, who was also shown the truth from the Creator, came to you to give you a second chance, and you also denied and persecuted her.”

“I *did*–” my father said, his face looking so sad as he turned to me. “But *humans*–there is no way that they are no longer corrupt.”

“Some humans are still corrupt, but most are good; most follow the Ancients once again,” I said.

I heard loud gasps and turned around to see Dominick swimming toward me. He reached me, panting, and I was too astonished to say anything.

“How dare you lead one of the human beasts here!” Father bellowed.

“He is one of the good ones. He follows the Ancients, and he has kept me safe.”

“Depart, human!” Father shouted, making a wave crash against Dominick's side, pulling him down into the water.

“Father!” I screamed; then I dove into the water to find him. He was swimming up toward the surface, and I helped him reach it faster.

“Meria–” he gasped as we broke though the surface. “Your father is rather intimidating,” he smirked. “But I have no doubt that I can handle

him."

"Well, you are a pirate," I said with a smirk.

He winked and swam over and placed himself in front of my father. "King of Marren," he said with a nod of his head. I heard the whispers from all the mer around us. My sister was gasping. I had never seen Dominick act so formally. He seemed more like a prince than ever before."Stop trusting in things that have *hurt* your people. The truth is *here,* right now." He broke the silence.

"Human," Father snarled.

"I can attest that humans do not seek to harm Marren or any magical beings," Dominick said.

"And I am to take your oath? How? How can I trust a corrupt one of your vile human race?"

"You are a fool if you do not!" We all turned around to see a middle-aged mermaid with light blond hair with blue tints and a tail–a tail that shimmered turquoise in the water.

My heart beat faster.

Is it–

"Allia," Father gasped.

–My mother.

"Hello, will you make the same foolish mistake that you made so long ago? Will you deny your people their lives, now?"

"We were safe under the sea! I was only doing what we had been doing for centuries, what always kept us safe. I waited for the Ancient to come," Father said as Mother swam up to tread water beside Dominick and me.

"Well, she has come. You better listen to your daughter, or you will kill more of our people!" she shouted.

"How are you here?" Father gasped.

"The Ancients," she said, looking at all my sisters, then resting her gaze upon me. "I came to support my daughter. I love you, Meria. Thank you for saving our people from your father's ignorance."

I had no words. Her eyes were warm and so were her arms as she wrapped them around me. That–that had been the missing piece for me under the sea. That had been the reason I did not feel like I belonged. I was like my mother.

"I was looking for you–" I began.

“I know, dearest, Celia told me, and you traveled the Misted Seas? You truly are a strong soul. I knew you were special the first time I held you in my arms.” She kissed my cheek.

“I am so happy to finally be with you.”

“And I you. I am so proud of you and your example of strength. I missed you every single day.” Her eyes, so soft and warm, made me feel at peace. “I am going to go talk to your foolish father, now, and to all our people,” she said with a wicked grin, kissing the top of my head.

“Your king has failed you all–” my mother began, pulling away from me to shout to all the mer. “Many have lost loved ones to the darkness. Will you keep doing likewise until our race is lost forever?” my mother called.

Dominick touched my hand, and I clasped it tight beneath the water.

“Go up and onto the shore, and see for yourselves that you also have legs as well as scales. That our ancestors lived and prospered on Marren Island,” the old queen called.

There were murmurs around us within the water, and Finn swam over to us.

“Who wants to join me? Legs are pretty useful,” he said. A small group followed him, and Father was still silent. Slowly, more and more merpeople swam toward Marren Island.

“I only wanted to help our people,” Father finally said as he left the rock and approached Mother.

“You are a fool.”

“Can you ever forgive me?” Father asked.

“I doubt it. You removed me, not only from my kingdom, but from my children. I have not seen them for nearly two decades. I missed out on watching them grow. I did not see them marry and have children of their own. You robbed me, Marren King. You stole my life from me. That is not something I can take lightly. You are incompetent and should step down as king. You almost destroyed our entire race with your pride and foolish ways.”

“King of Marren,” Ancient Celia’s voice boomed loud. “You are stripped of your title and crown. You are not a worthy ruler of Marren.”

“I will do as you ask and beg for forgiveness. Will you banish me?”

“I will not do what you so foolishly did when you banished, not only your righteous Queen, but Marren’s youngest princess–still, you will only

be allowed to remain in Marren if the new Queen allows it," Celia answered him.

"And who is this new Queen, great Ancient?" Father asked, bowing his head.

"Queen Allia is Queen and ruler of all mer, until it is time for her eldest daughter and her husband to replace her. Queen Allia will restore order and balance to the merpeople. All Hail to Queen Allia!" the Ancient called out.

Everyone shouted in unison, "All hail to Queen Allia!"

"You know what to do, Queen Allia. You shall be blessed." Ancient Celia turned to look at me. "I am happy you are finally reunited with your mother, but I would advise you, Meria, to not shield your heart–but trust it."

Then, with a silver shower of sparkles, the Ancient was gone.

"I am sorry for what I have done, my Queen," Father said, turning to my mother.

"Thank you, and even though you have betrayed both your family and your people, you may live in Marren as long as you do not cause anymore problems. About fully forgiving you, we shall see. I am not like you, I am not vindictive. Still, for the moment, I do not forgive you."

Father nodded. It was so strange to see him so defeated. I knew he had done bad things, but my mother's mercy toward him was a reminder that the Ancient's ways were good.

"I will make sure the human kingdoms are aware of the peace that exists here," Dominick said.

"We shall be hopeful for good things from humans, I have seen their kindness first hand," my mother, the Queen of Marren said to Dominick with a kind smile.

"I will leave you alone with your family, and then we shall speak later," he said, coming close to me.

"I will come back with you," I said to him.

"But–" Dominick started.

"Unless you do not want me to come back with you?"

"No, of course, you are always welcome."

"Meria?" I turned to see Edmar beside Coral, my sister. He looked at me with pain in his eyes.

"Hello, Edmar," I said, moving even closer to Dominick. Dominick looked down at me, then at Edmar.

"Is this your betrothed?" he whispered in my ear.

“Yes, he was.”

Edmar came to swim right in front of me.

“You left, and I had no idea,” he said.

“Edmar, I will not marry you. You are a nice mer; however, we are not compatible. I should have never had my father choose my match.”

“I have had time to think about it. If this has to do with the children thing, I am okay with having more.”

“No. It has to do with me–and you. I do not love you, Edmar.”

His face looked shocked. Then he looked at Dominick.

“You *love* this *human*?”

“I–”

“She does not have to answer to you. You are no longer her betrothed, so swim away,” Dominick nearly growled at Edmar.

“I see–well then, if there is nothing I can do to change your mind.”

“No, there is not. Goodbye, Edmar.”

I turned to look at my startled siblings’ faces. Rina had tears in her eyes.

“I love you, Meria. I hope you are always happy, even if it is with a human.”

“I will see you later; I am not leaving, forever,” I said to her, although I was not sure, as I understood what I had to do to break Dominick’s curse, and I was dead set on doing it since everything was settled in Marren.

“See you soon, then,” she said, giving me a hug. One by one, I hugged my sisters and kissed my nieces and nephews on their heads.

“Meria, I am so proud of you.” I turned to see my mother.

“Thank you, Mother,” I said with tears in my eyes.

“Now, do what you must.” I looked to my father, who swam over to me. There was a softness in his eyes I had never before seen from the former Marren King.

“Meria–I am sorry I banished you. I have regretted it as well as banishing your mother since the day I did those things. I am hard-headed, and I was foolish. I did not follow my soul’s melody when it told me to listen. I clung to the past, when I should have seen the signs that the Ancients sent. Although they had not come, they sent you and your mother to show us the way. So many mer could have been saved if I would have listened to your mother and you. I am humbled today by my mistakes. I am ashamed to say we only rose today because I was forced to do so, as the Marren Lights are all but gone.”

“We all have things to learn. I learned on this journey. I learned more about who I am and what I want. I also learned to not be so silent. Silent obedience is *not* the way of the Creator,” I said.

“Your father has much to learn, and I shall teach him as best I can. First thing I will do is demand that he never say, ‘silently obey’ again,” my mother said.

“I am willing to acknowledge my faults, and I know I wronged you, Allia, and you, Meria.”

“Thank you, Father, but like I said, I found my voice. I never would have if I had never been banished. I do not regret what happened, but I hope that in the future you will listen, instead of silencing those around you.”

Without another word, I turned. My heart was racing. I had never been so bold before toward my father. The feeling, while invigorating, was also exhausting. I wanted to be on the ship in the captain's quarters, away from all those eyes.

The thought struck me that I had no desire to dive into the depths, back to the Marren palace. I wanted to go to the ship.

What does that say about me? What does that say about where I belong?

I belonged in the human world, or I wanted to belong there. I had believed as much when I took that star from the Mirror Sea to take away Dominick’s curse and give up my tail. But, at that moment, more than ever before, while I still loved the sea, I realized that I did not want my old life. I liked the life I had found. I wanted to have the future I saw with Dominick with children all around us. I wanted that dream to finally come true. My grandest dream had never been being a mermaid. It was to have my own life, my own love, my own family.

I looked around at my people, and I was happy, knowing that they would be alright. My mother would be a wonderful Queen again, guiding the mer into their new future. I would miss my sisters, my nieces and nephews, but that was my *goodbye*. A goodbye to the old Meria–the “silently obedient,” little mermaid.

I had finally said what I wanted to say and what needed to be said.

I waved goodbye, and with Dominick at my side, I swam back to the ship.

“I am so proud of you, Meria,” Dominick said as we swam.

“That was utterly terrifying,” I gasped with a small chuckle.

“And yet, you did it. You didn't apologize once, and you stood your ground.”

“I did, and even to Edmar.”

“I hate him. It truly took everything in me to *not* torture him. To think he kissed *you*–that you and him–” he paused.

“I am done with him. He knows that, now.”

“Yes. I truly am so very proud of you. You were wonderful,” he said as we reached the ship and took the rope Peter tossed out to us. Dominick was so handsome there in the water, his hair askew and his face dripping wet.

“Thank you for coming to support me,” I said, touching his hair to fix a section that was sticking up.

“It seems I am a loyal pirate. Where you go, I will go.”

“I like that.”

Peter pulled us from the water, slowly. As we both arrived on deck, soaked with sea water, we simply stood there, grinning and looking at each other.

“Are you guys going to kiss, or what? This tension is killing all of us.” I expected such words from Sands, but it was Peter who said them.

“What?” Dominick asked.

“So you *have* kissed her?” Peter said with a laugh.

“Go about your business. We set sail for Walden,” Dominick said as he took my hand and pulled me to the back of the ship and into the cabin. How did he know that was all that I wanted, to be in that cabin with him. Maybe he did not know, maybe he simply wanted that, too. My heart fluttered, so many feelings curling and sloshing around inside of me. I loved that pirate so much. “Sorry about him. I’m sure you know about siblings,” he said as we stepped inside. Then he grabbed a linen towel and wiped his face free of seawater. I remembered, then, that we could not be alone in the cabin, for that was where the Pixie Isle children slept. Most of them were still sleeping–and if not, they were still in there, sitting or laying around, obviously still exhausted from all they had endured. I did not blame them at all.

“Yes, the worst,” I said, looking at him as he smiled. “–but also the best,” I added with a smirk.

He gave a knowing grin. “I want to help the children before they return. I think I can take away their pain and help them have a better life once back in Walden.”

“But all that pain is life experience, and it builds who they are; maybe this is the path the Creator wanted for them. I have already helped them as much as I believe they should be helped. All pain is not necessarily a bad thing.”

He nodded and added: “I cannot remove their memories, just be a balm for them for a time, although I do wish I could take it all away.”

“I understand, and I am sure that your gift will be a great relief for them. Thank you, Dominick, for being so kind.”

“Your mother–” he said tenderly. “I am so happy that you found her. Are you sure you do not wish to stay?”

“I will have plenty of time to catch up with her, I am sure. Although it felt like a goodbye of sorts, I know that she will be in my future. I am needed here, now,” I interrupted him, motioning to the children. “But tell me, you really do not know where your sister is?”

“No, I do not.”

“And yet, we are still sailing to Walden?”

“Yes,”

“Where you plan to meet with your mother?”

“Yes.”

“Why this sudden change? You were so set on finding your sister–so you could have your revenge, of sorts.”

“The Mirror Sea changed me a little. I–I did not pull out my desire–I pulled out yours.”

“You what?” I gasped.

“How could you leave your greatest desire, Meria? You wanted so badly to find your mother and save your people. What star did you take instead?” he asked, looking at me, so confused. I bit my lip. I was not yet ready to tell him. I could not tell him or else he would not let me do it–heal him–break his curse.

“I–I needed something else, Dominick–something infinitely more important for my future.”

“What?” he nearly begged, stepping closer to me. We were whispering, but then and there was not the place nor time to have such a conversation, with all those suffering children around us. There was a moan, and we both turned to look upon a little boy who was shaking.

“We shall speak of this later,” Dominick said as he turned to me and waited for me to nod before he took off his gloves, and I stood beside him

as, one by one, he took on the pains of the children.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Dominick

It was the moment I had been waiting for. The moment when I would face my mother.

Is it true what the sea dragon had said about her? I wondered. *About her feelings for me?* I trusted that I did not need Layla. I hoped I was right.

"All will be well, Dom. More than well, actually. You have no idea how much we have missed you." I could not respond to him; I was too focused on what was going to happen–on what *could* happen. I tried to put a shield around my heart and get ready for a cool mother with hate in her eyes.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Meria asked at my other side as the ship was tied down and the crew began to leave it, enthusiastically. Peter must have told them not to speak to anyone about me taking over the ship. Captain William had a hard time letting me keep the ship under my command, but once Peter explained that I was Crown Prince Dominick, he had said nothing more, which, from what I had noticed about Captain William, was a feat for him. I wished him well, and was grateful my brother had a loyal friend.

“Yes, I always wish you to be with me,” I answered her, taking her hand without thinking. My words came out in a clear tone, as if it were as obvious as the sky was blue.

To me, it was. I knew there were so many things unspoken between us. So much had happened, and we never had the chance to discuss several very important matters. We would, eventually, because I had so many things to tell her.

Peter chuckled. “Mother *is* kinder than the dragon I heard you two faced.” He patted my back, and I watched him with Meria’s hand in mine as he walked hand-in-hand with his Gwendolyn off of the ship, down to the dock, and then into a carriage marked, *Walden*.

“Are you ready?” Meria asked, stepping into my view.

“I am not sure I will ever be *ready*. Were the children loaded off?” I asked, looking at Meria.

“They were the first ones to leave. Sands is making sure they find their families. They seemed so much better this morning. You helped them so much, Dominick.”

“Sometimes, this curse is helpful,” I shrugged. I did not want to move. I felt like a coward. Even with all the information I had, that my mother actually wanted to see me and had always wanted me back, I felt as if *seeing* her was more burdensome than me not getting my revenge on a hateful mother. I had dealt with more hateful people than kind people throughout my life, but I had handled Peter just fine, I reasoned with myself.

“DOMINICK!” I turned from Meria to see a woman, running from a carriage, up the dock, and onto the ship, her dark blue, very fine dress, twisting around her legs as she ran. Her hair was dark brown, and her eyes were dark blue, just like mine and just like Peter’s. “Oh, Dominick!” She was crying, tears streaming down her cheeks as she reached me and Meria. I watched in confusion as she threw herself at my legs and held on there. “I thought I would never see you again, my dear boy–my sweet, dear boy!” she cried.

I bent down, and she in all her finery moved back, and she sat down on the ship's deck. She reached out and touched my face. “You do look just like him! You are *so* handsome. My boy! Oh, Dominick! You have come home!” She wrapped her arms around my neck.

I had never pictured such a thing, even when Peter had expressed to me that she wanted to see me.

I was too shocked for words.

“You are Queen of Walden?” I heard Meria say, standing beside me.

My mother removed herself from me and stood. I stood also.

“I am, and *you* are?” she asked, wiping away tears.

“I am Meria, Dominick’s friend.”

“My *friend*?” I asked in irritation, looking from my mother and back to Meria. “You are *not* my ‘friend,’” I grunted. But, maybe that's what she thought *it* was? I had doubts trickling in. “Are you?” I asked her, hoping that she, too, had felt what had been growing between us.

“Not *exactly*. We can discuss that later, but for the moment, your mother is here, Dominick,” she said, pointing to my mother.

“I understand; she is your *maiden,* whatever stage you are in. I am so pleased to meet you, the maiden my son cares for,” she said with a curtsy.

“It is a pleasure,” Meria said back with a smile.

“Dominick, thank you for coming home. I have prayed for this day,” she said sweetly, keeping her distance as if she could sense that I was a bit spooked. “The Creator is so good!”

“I always wanted to come home. I wrote you letters–” I began, not knowing exactly where to start, but needing to start somewhere.

“You did? I never received any letter. I sent ships filled with knights to search for you. We could not find you, and I *never* received any letter.”

“None?” I asked. I was not surprised. Veeto was an awful man. Of course, he had lied to me.

“No, if I had, I would have answered. Nothing was ever the same without you,” she whispered.

“But I killed my father; surely, you hate me for that. You sent me away–onto Veeto’s ship, because you could not stand to look upon me, yet you still asked me to make basic princely appearances to make it *appear* as if Walden had no issues.”

“Hate you? How could I ever! And, *no,* Veeto?! That is where you have been all this time? Oh, my poor boy!” she cried.

“You did not tell Veeto to take me? Did you not instruct me to attend to my royal duties?”

“No. We always wondered why you were doing royal events, and I tried each time to reach you in time–before you left, and I even stationed Walden

knights at various events, just in case you came, and I hoped that they could, well, *capture* you. I was desperate; I would have captured you, just to see you, to speak with you so that I could understand. Yet my soldiers were always ambushed, and you only were at those events for a brief time, and then, you always vanished. I cannot believe you have been with that vile man."

"I should have known that he lied to me. Was he even Father's brother?" I asked, but with more hatred than I already had for Veeto, curling around inside of me.

"His brother! Why, my boy! Is that the lie he fed you? No, Veeto is a notorious pirate lord who stole from many cities within Walden, and he always got away. Father spent so long trying to find him, but when he fell ill, he never got the chance, and Veeto left the Walden Seas."

That information made my head spin.

"Perhaps, we should go, Dominick, get off the ship and speak at the castle?" Meria whispered from beside me.

I nodded, feeling all the pain of so many years rise to the surface. All the useless guilt–all the lies. "You never sent me away? Never blamed me for Father's death, and you wanted me all this time?" I asked in awe.

My mother walked closer to me, touching my cheek. Her white, gloved hands caressed my skin.

"I have always loved you, wanted you, and your father died because of an illness. That night when you got that scar, that was because you *startled* your father, and he was already lost to us. He became upset because he was not himself. I tried to tell you–"

"I remember. I held onto what you said for so long, but Veeto's torture and lying words poisoned my reality–and those memories. I thought I made up your love for me."

"I do love you. I have always loved you, and I will always love you, my child. Come, come home, Dominick. Let me show you your home."

I turned to look at Meria, who stood behind me. She was still holding my hand, and the three of us, hand-in-hand, walked from the dock and into my mother's carriage. Peter was long gone, having taken another carriage while we were speaking with my mother.

As the carriage door closed, I looked over at Meria, and I could see the thrill of the newness of it all within her eyes.

"This is a carriage. Horses pull it," I explained.

“Incredible, I would love to ride a horse. I wonder if they are similar to sea horses, even though they are much larger,” she said quietly beside me. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

“I will show you everything. And, *no*, they really are not very similar; and yes, in particular, their size.”

The carriage rocked back and forth in more unrhythmic and rough movements than that of the sea, and I must have fallen asleep. I did not think the docks were that far from the castle. Perhaps, we had arrived at a port further up the coastline. I was eager to reach land.

“I know that I do not know you, but thank you for caring for my son. He has been through things no one should ever have to go through, and to know he has someone to share his life with, that makes my heart so happy,” I heard my mother whisper. My head was against the padded carriage wall, and although awake, I kept my eyes shut to secretly hear what Meria would say to my mother’s comments. I should have been the one to tell her how I feel–to make her feel safe, yet I was a coward and too comfortable with how things were, right then. I was afraid that if I spoke my feelings, she would choose to walk away. So living in a sort of *limbo* was what I had let happen.

I was *anti-emotions*, anyway. I utterly hated the blasted things.

“He is easy to be with, Your Highness. He is so good, although he does not think so,” Meria said.

“How about his curse? I see he still wears gloves?”

“It is horrible. He is in constant pain, although he never complains. I have a plan that will help with his curse, though. I am only waiting till the time is right.”

A plan? What kind of plan? If it involves leaving me, I am viciously opposed. I need to speak to her. My heart raced, and I felt a bit dizzy with the fear of sharing something so personal.

“Do you know how to break his curse?” my mother asked with excitement.

“I can tell you, Your Majesty, that I will do all in my power to help your son.”

“Thank you. He has chosen well for himself,” my mother said.

There was a silence and a massive rocking of the carriage where I could not feign sleep any longer, for such a bump would wake even the heaviest of sleepers. I pretended to stretch and groan.

“Did you sleep alright?” my mother asked as I met her eyes.

“Yes, thank you,” I said with a nod. “I did not know Walden was so far from the sea.”

“Yes, well, your ship docked up the coast, not in the usual spot. The castle is right on the water, but down the coastline a ways. We should be arriving in a few minutes, actually.”

“I am eager to see it,” I said. My mind was not focused on the pleasantries, but on the weighty words Meria had shared with my mother.

“Have you never ridden in a carriage before, Meria?” my mother asked.

“No–I have never been on this land before, being a mer, of course,” Meria shrugged.

“A mer? You do not mean–*mermaid,* do you?”

“Yes, indeed,” Meria said with a smile and a nod.

“Oh, my! I never knew they truly existed.”

“They do,” I said, smiling at Meria. “I wish to make it known that no harm should come to any mer. It is important to me that our people make the mer feel safe in our waters.”

“Of course–our people were only ever afraid of sirens.” My mother hesitated.

“I assure you, Your Majesty, I am no siren, and I pose no threat to humans. Sirens do exist, but they reside in colder, deeper, magical waters.”

“Oh–I am sure there is much for me to learn. I am happy to learn what I can.”

“Thank you. Meria is very important to me,” I said.

“A mermaid, how incredible. You found mermaids,” My mother said with a smile.

I knew the discovery would be a shock. Most people thought they were made up.

“Captured one, actually,” I said, smirking at Meria.

“I am *not* captured, I wished to be caught,” she said, brushing her shoulder against mine.

“You two are so sweet,” my mother said, tears glistening on her cheeks. “I am so happy you are home, Dominick, so, so happy.”

The carriage stopped, and we saw the palace. It had been so long, and I was not sure what to expect. I knew there was a side entrance to the palace, which had steps leading into the sea, and I knew the castle was white with spires. It was gleaming in the sunlight, bright with colorful gardens, full of flowers and tropical greenery. The air felt fresh, like lush florals and the salty sea. It was a familiar scent that took me back to my childhood. It felt like home, despite it being over ten years since I had last stepped onto those grounds.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Meria

My time spent in Walden, which was the first human kingdom I had ever visited, could be described in one word: blissful. Nearly every chance we got, Dominick and I spent time alone. It was an adjustment, not having the ships movements beneath my feet, and I was brought back to the first time I had met Dominick on Marren Island.

Dominick had me spend time with the horses and then in gardens. The plants above the sea could rival the coral reefs, which I loved. I got to know Peter and Gwendolyn even more, and Dominick, although still dealing with his curse, seemed happier and more whole than I had ever seen him before.

There was a lightness in his step, in his eyes, and his shoulders. He often pulled me into dark corners of the palace and kissed me until we needed to come up for air. It had only been a few days, but it felt like years.

Finn and some of the other mer, eventually, met with the Queen and drew up a peace treaty. No humans would hurt any mermaids, and no mermaids would hurt any humans.

Things were wonderful.

I was ready to break his curse, but I was trying to sense with my melody when the time was right. I had never trusted myself before–never fully trusted my heart or my soul. That time, with such an important task, I wanted to make sure I did. While it was horrible to wait, because seeing Dominick in daily pain also pained me, I was patient. I had spent hours in the sea, not knowing which time would be the last time I would have my tail, but it was nothing in comparison to spending time with Dominick. Even if I could never step into the waves again, I would be happy because, it was only with Dominick that I would receive my dream.

I was happy that he had not needed his sister to reunite with his mother and return to Walden. Although, indeed, I wondered where she was and hoped the Ancients were watching over her.

That happy bubble we were in, it was special, and I was sure neither of us wanted to burst it, but we had to. There were so many things we had left unsaid. I had to stop being a coward, and Dominick, he needed to express his feelings, even though it was hard for him.

"Mermaid, you are mine," I heard from behind me as I walked down the main corridor, wearing a teal dress which Dominick said was the perfect shade for me, as it was the same color as my tail. The bodice even shimmered a bit. That first day I arrived, the Queen had commissioned gowns to be made for me. I was rather fond of them; they floated about me in a very pleasant way, and the way Dominick looked at me in *said* dresses, it was as if I was the only sip of water on a deserted island.

I liked that *very* much.

I was also given a maid, who braided my hair, but it was never the same as how Dominick had braided it, so I always undid the braids woven by the maid and sought out Dominick to redo it in his rope style. He never complained, and we always ended up kissing each other by the end, which I never complained about either, even when, sometimes, he messed up my hair and would have to do it all over again. Anytime with Dominick was time well spent.

His arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me into his room. He kissed down my neck as the door clicked shut behind us, and I giggled.

"You are not as afraid as a captive should be, mermaid. Perhaps, I should be more fearsome?"

I smiled at the way Dominick spoke at the palace. He had a slightly more formal way of talking. It was his princely side coming out, and I would

have been lying if I had said that I did not find it incredibly dashing.

Dominick

Meria was inside my room and in my arms. Her hair was a wild mess around her, and it trailed down her back. To say it wasn't my favorite hairstyle, that would be a lie. As much as I enjoyed braiding her hair, seeing her hair as it was, all about her, that was the maiden–*mermaid* I had first met, and who I had grown so attached to.

Her eyes were so warm and welcoming. I trusted her. We had been in Walden for a short time, and I hoped that the reason she had not dived into the sea, never to return, was because she wanted to be with me. All her problems had been solved, and her mother had been found. Still, she did not leave; she remained at my side. That was what I needed. One of the reasons I had waited so long to share my feelings with her was because I did not want my feelings to persuade her to stay with me, if it was not what she wanted. I wanted her with me always, but I did not want to force her into anything.

Just one night earlier, I had been contemplating such things when I had a rather interesting visit from an Ancient.

“You are a fool.” I turned around to see a brown cloaked figure amidst smoke appear in my room.

“Excuse me?”

“I am Ancient Teddy, the most powerful Ancient in all the lands, and I said ‘you are a fool.’”

“No, I heard you–just *why* are you here, insulting me?”

“Listen, I get it, you are having a hard time saying out loud what is in here–” He tapped on his chest. “I get that, but I am telling you, you have wasted enough time. Tell that mermaid that you love her, or I will drag her in here and force you to tell her in front of me, or I will tell her for you. She is not going anywhere; she will not get tired of you; she will not leave you.”

“Why?”

“Why, what? I said so many things. What is the question?”

“Why am I blessed with her?” I asked, sinking down onto the bed.

“Ah, I see, you do not feel *worthy*?”

“I am unsure of all the reasons for my hesitation. I know that I am too selfish to give her up even though I *am* unworthy–”

“You have been through much in your life. Everyone who said they loved you or was supposed to love you, failed you–or so you were led to believe. I know about how your father struck you–and how you believed that you killed him, how you thought your mother did not love you and sent you away with your father’s brother–who never was your father’s brother. I know Veeto took advantage of you, and I know you did what you had to do to survive.”

“And still, why can I not tell her?”

“It is not all that complicated. Your past has made opening up and trusting people difficult. But you opened up to Sands, and nothing bad came from it; also, you did it with Peter and your mother. Even Meria, she has never left you.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Have courage, be brave, Prince. You were The Cruel Hand were you not? I believe he was fearless?”

“He is dead, but *no*, he held every fear.”

“Well, being brave doesn't mean we have no fears, Prince–it means that even though we fear, we do the difficult things anyway. That is bravery *and* courage.”

“I know you are right. Meria deserves to hear my feelings for her.”

“Yes, so you will tell her?"

“I will tell her,” I said with determination.

“Good–because it is exhausting waiting, and I am getting impatient. I have a life, you know–although I am an Ancient, I do things.”

“Sure–”

“Now, if I were you and had someone to do those things with? If I had a love like yours? I would shout it from the mountain tops of Haleston and write it in stone and gold.”

“I promise, I will tell her.”

“Good,” then with a grunt of irritation and a puff of gray smoke, the Ancient was gone, and I was left alone, feeling more like an utter fool than I ever had in my entire life.

I had been ready for a very long time in many ways, and she was there with me, and I was holding her. It did take me a while to discover that my feelings were really *love* and not infatuation.

Having a lack of love in my life made it difficult to recognize it for what it was. But, I loved Meria with everything in me. I knew I did.

I still wondered which star she had chosen, and I hoped that someday she would share that with me. What was a desire she had that was even greater than her goal when she set out on her journey?

"Meria–" I whispered as I hovered over her mouth, her beautiful, perfect lips, which I had the privilege of kissing every single day. Truly, I was a blessed man, blessed by the Ancients. I would go through everything I had gone through during my life, over and over again, just to have her there with me in my arms and in my life.

"Yes–" she whispered back, her warm breath on my lips. She always smelled like the freshness of the sea–and the waves. I tangled my hands in her messy hair.

"Will you stay with me forever?" I wished I could say that I was not afraid of her answer, but I was. With one word, she could break me. With one word, she could send me into endless torment. One word, and I was going to be either the happiest I had ever been in my entire life or begging Sands to tie an anchor to my boots and send me to the locker's depths.

"Yes–" she said with a nod, her eyes locked onto mine.

I grinned. My confidence grew as I realized what that word meant.

"Will you stay with me *forever*?" she asked.

"Yes, always," I said back with a side smile I knew she liked because of the way her eyes looked at my mouth. "How could you ever doubt it?"

"There are many things we have not said, Dominick."

"I know, and I wish to say them now. You have been so patient with me," I said. I moved closer. "Listen to all I have to say, for I am not sure I can

say it a second time," I began while caressing my lips softly against her mouth, teasing her.

She whined.

"Kiss me," she pouted, and I gave her one gentle peck and stepped back.

"I must say this," I said, putting my hands up.

She laughed and nodded, waiting.

"I love you, Meria."

"Dominick!" she cried out, reaching for me, caressing my face, with tears dripping down her cheeks. "I love *you*, Dominick, so incredibly much," she whispered. I wiped away her tears and smiled.

"I am not one to make long poetic verses. I am a pirate, and all I can say to express how I feel is that I am so deeply in love with you; my heart is yours. I will go with you to the fathoms and let you rip my heart from my chest, because it belongs to you."

"I am no siren! I would never drown you in the sea! That is a bit offensive," she said, placing her hands on her hips.

I chuckled.

"But I will say," she added. "I wish to never leave you as long as I live."

"The point is that I *would* let you–if that was what you wanted. I would still love you even if you were a siren. Is that not romantic?" I asked, turning my head to the side.

"You would let me drown you if I wanted to?" she questioned.

"Yes–that's how much I trust you–*love* you," I said with a chuckle. It was not working, not going as I had expected. I should have never asked for advice.

"You know, that sounds like something Sands coached you to say. I want to hear what *you* want to say," she said, pursing her lips and raising a brow.

Blast, it *was* advice from Sands. I had asked him just that morning how to confess my feelings. I should have known not to ask him. So much for him once winning the heart of a princess.

"Okay, maybe I did get some pointers from Sands, but he says women want long declarations."

"Not this *mermaid*; I just want whatever you wish to tell me, right now," she said, walking closer to me, touching my chest, her beautiful light blue eyes holding me captive.

"You are *it,* Meria." I said, stroking her cheek. She leaned into my touch, and I smiled. "When I went into the Mirror Sea, I was given the choice of

my desire, and I realized then, under those waters, that what I desired the most was *you*–making *you* happy. I do not know why you left *it* behind–left behind the star that could save your people–"

"Because I took a different star–one that was one of *your* deepest desires," she whispered.

"What was it?" I asked gently. But she ignored my question.

"That was much better than what Sands told you to say," she giggled. That had been a new thing for her since being in Walden–her giggles. I loved them as well as the brightness in her eyes whenever she discovered something new in the human world. I liked hearing that girlish giggle; it was as if I had earned the right to hear such a vulnerable sound from her.

"Yeah?" I asked, caressing my lips against her jaw.

"Yes–you have a way with words that he does not."

"Well, you are mine–I will keep you forever. You are this pirate's grandest treasure. I love you with every single aching beat of this heart, and I wish to marry you and have a family–with as many little children as you wish. I want to create that with you–play on the beach, in the sea, on a ship, and come back here from time to time. I want all of that, and I will steal it if I have to. I like to steal, rob, and plunder, you know.

"It is true, you are a pirate," she said playfully with a shrug and a smile.

"It seems my reputation precedes me," I said teasingly.

"I want that, too–every single thing." Then Meria took my face in her hands and looked me in the eye. "There is only one last thing to do. Show you what I learned from the star I chose, and finally, let it come to be." Then she pressed her lips to mine.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Meria

His lips–so soft and warm with a heat that burned me from the inside out. Once I pressed my mouth to his, it ignited a fire within him that burned, and I felt it. He took my face in his hands, turning my head this way and that as he kissed me, just as I wished him to. I moved my mouth against his. That kiss was different from the others we had shared. Our feelings and desires had finally been spoken aloud. My heart was beating for him, wishing to be close. My soul's melody aching to dance with his–to entangle my soul with his and never to part. I pushed my magic into that kiss, wishing to do just that.

He grunted, and his hands found my waist, trailing down my back, pulling me closer to him.

"I can never get close enough to you, Meria," he said.

I could never get close enough to him, either. The song within my soul echoed between us, and the beauty of that moment caused tears to fall from my eyes and drip off my cheeks. That did not seem to bother Dominick, even as my tears dripped down my face. I cried for joy, not loss. It was

joyful as I said *goodbye* to my old life and embraced my new life, my new life as a human, and to always be beside Dominick as he was released–freed from his curse. There was not even much sorrow in the magic and tears as I thought there would be, only peace, hope, and joy for the future–a future with him without the burden of his curse. He did not wipe away my tears, and I was grateful for the magic I embedded inside of them. It would work all the better if he consumed them–if the magic worked from the inside out. I pressed my intent, singing:

–Heal him.
–Break his curse.

I poured all my magic into him, and I felt it when his heart released its own melody as if it had been locked inside of him for all that time. My soul's melody twisted with his, sealing us together in a way that I felt was impenetrable.

Us, forever.

One moment, we were entangled together, and the next minute, Dominick was stepping away from me, his eyes growing wide as his body started to glow. I also stepped back.

"What was that?" He clutched his chest.

"Are you alright?"

"I feel wonderful–but *what* was that?"

"I am a mermaid. Our souls' melodies are how we use our magic, and I found yours; they became one."

"I have no idea what that means, but if it makes me more connected to you–" he said, pulling me against his chest, "then I love it, but why am I glowing? Is that the magic?" he continued, and then, with a pop and a shift of black smoke, a figure appeared before us.

"Ah, the heart of a mermaid. I thought the knowledge had been lost long ago," an unfamiliar voice said. We both stepped away, still holding each other, but we turned to see who was the owner of the voice. "Mermaid hearts are precious. The first souls' melodies came from mermaids, who had souls that sang, long ago. They helped all magical beings discover their souls' melodies, and even humans were taught about them. There was a time, during the Great War when humans tried to steal mermaid tears, as well as mermaid hearts. But the only real way to use mermaid tears and

own a mermaid's heart is if they are freely given. I am happy to see a human who has captured a mermaid's heart after all this time." There was a man in a black cloak at the center of the room, speaking to us. His pale skin was striking, even in the partial darkness of the room.

"What is happening?" I whispered, more to Dominick than to the stranger.

"Who are you?" Dominick asked.

"I am an Ancient, Draken, and your curse, Prince Dominick, to inflict pain and take on pain has been broken." As he said those words, the light left Dominick, and he stood there with a lightness I had never seen in him before. He looked at his hands and quickly took off his gloves; the black veins were gone. "I hope you are sure of your great sacrifice. There is no way to undo what you have done," Ancient Draken said to me. I knew what he meant, but also knew that Dominick had no idea. But it was *my* choice, and I was determined to *not* be swayed. I trusted my heart and my soul.

This is right.

"What does that mean? What sacrifice?" Dominick asked, turning from Ancient Draken to me. But before I could speak, the Ancient continued.

"She is, now, permanently a human. She gave up her tail to be with you–to save you."

"What?" Dominick shouted, looking down at me. "Please tell me you did not give such a thing up to break my curse, Meria–"

"I did, and I would give up even more to see you without pain–and for you to be truly happy," I said, wrapping my arms more tightly around his neck.

"I am happy. I can handle the pain. I have endured it for my entire life," he said sadly, pressing his forehead to mine.

"I do not need to be a mermaid. I have had my entire life as a mermaid. It is time for me to embrace being a human, and besides, I can still swim. I'll just be a human who is swimming."

"There is nothing I can do to get her tail back?" Dominick asked, taking a few steps toward Ancient Draken, breaking our contact.

"No. It was a beautiful gift that she has given you; do not ruin it. You have found the love of a mermaid. They have the purest souls among all of us."

With another pop and a mist of blue smoke and sparkles, a woman stood beside Draken.

“Dominick, I am so happy that you are free,” she said with a smile. “You can leave now,” she said curtly to Ancient Draken.

“Ora,” Draken said to the woman in annoyance.

“Draken,” she snapped back.

“Where is your little lap dog?" Draken asked.

“Oh, me? Right here.” In another pop of silver smoke and a trail of sparkles, another man appeared in a brown cloak. “Hello again, Dominick. Good job keeping your word. I will remember that,” he said with a flick of his wrist toward Dominick.

“You know him?”

“He came to me last night–told me to stop being a fool and confess my love for you.”

“Oh–I like him, then. I was starting to think you never would.”

“I am sorry it took me so long,” he whispered.

I squeezed his hand, and the Ancients started talking again.

“Of course, you are never far behind,” Ancient Draken said in irritation to the Ancient in the brown cloak.

“You know, for someone who put Ora and I together, you seem rather jealous,” the brown cloaked man said.

“Jealous?” Draken barked. “You know not a thing. You are a fool.” Draken was laughing, and the man in the hooded cloak seemed confused.

“Do be quiet, Theodore! The last thing he is, is *jealous*. Creator, please help me,” Ancient Ora said with closed eyes.

“Well, why else is he so obsessed with getting your attention?” the Ancient named Theodore asked. “Huh? Why do you care about making her hunt you down so much if you are not looking for her attention?”

“I do not seek her attention. I want to be left alone,” Ancient Draken said with a cruel smile upon his lips. He still seemed amused, and Ora seemed angry.

“If you wanted that, you would not be cursing humans, and *flirting* with Ora,” Ancient Theodore said.

“I’ve had enough–set him straight, Ora.” With a flick of his wrist and a puff of black smoke, Ancient Draken was gone.

“You really made yourself look like a fool,” Ora said with a shake of her head toward Theodore.

“That is my thing–”

“Yes, but you lout, he is my *brother*!” Ora shouted.

There was silence. That was Ancient Ora, and Ancient Draken was her brother? I had never heard such a thing before. Draken was the most famous Ancient. I had no idea he had a sister.

"Ah–I can see why the jealous angle did not work on him," Ancient Theodore said with a shrug. "Brother, though, huh? I will say, I am shocked for many reasons, but one thing I will note is that you two do not look alike at all."

"We can talk after this, Theodore–" Ora said, motioning to where Dominick and I stood, still taking everything in. "Dominick, be well, and know that your sister will also be well in time. You are much loved by your mother, brother, and Meria."

"What do you mean? Where is his sister?" I asked.

"Sometimes, humans with good intentions try to break a curse, like Dominick searching for his sister, although, yes, I know your true motive," she said, looking hard at Dominick, who nodded. "The Creator has a plan, one I do not always understand, but one thing I know for certain is that you have already helped your sister break her curse."

"Her curse is broken?"

"In the process–like I said, she will be well and is being looked after. Someday, you will discover how you helped her, but for now, I cannot say more."

"I am glad she will be well–" Dominick began.

"Of course, sometimes, humans do foolish things and mess up the course of things," the hooded Ancient Theodore said.

"True–but I have hope for the humans of this generation. As you know, curses are breaking. Draken is slowly being stopped," Ancient Ora smiled. "I have to go, but I wish you well." Then with a snap, and shimmering blue smoke, Ora was gone.

"I am Ancient Teddy, and by the way, Ora likes to call me *Theodore*–rather endearing, really, calling me by my full name. At first, I hated it because, well, you would have to meet my father, and then you would understand. It truly is a pity that I was named after him. Wretched man."

"So is everything alright? I am truly free of my curse?" Dominick asked. "And Meria, we are going to be speaking about what you did."

"For the hundredth time, you told me to *not* just do as you say. So I made my own choice, which is *mine* to make, correct?" I asked.

"Well, yes, but–" he began.

“What, do you not *like* me without my tail?” I asked.

“Of course, I like you without it, and with it–but I–”

I touched his face. “I am truly alright. This is what I want. Please, let me have what I want.”

“But you love the sea.”

“I love you, and what we will have together in the future, even more. So much more.”

“Can I still call you, my mermaid?” he asked with a wicked grin.

“I will always be ‘your mermaid,’ even without a tail.”

“My, that is sweet!”

We both turned to see Ancient Teddy was still there.

“You know, what I would truly worry about at the moment, if I were you, is Princess Briar, Dominick.”

“Why?” Dominick asked.

“You lost her brother. Do you not remember, Prince Stephan was on your ship?"

“Prince Stephan?” Dominick asked, confused.

“Oh, did you not know that Prince Stephan is The Grimm?” he asked, looking back and forth between us. I had no idea who this ‘Grimm’ was. “No? Well then, surprise!”

“Blast it all. We can send some ships to search for him,” Dominick said.

“I should go. Do not fret; The Grimm is still alive. ”

“Can you tell us anything about where he is?” I asked the Ancient.

“No,” he said with a smile.

“Helpful,” Dominick said under his breath. I poked his side, and he smiled, leaning down to kiss my cheek, then traveling to my lips.

“See you two later, and what Ora forgot to say, but usually does, is this–” he began as he spun around in a puff of silvery smoke. His words echoed around us:

“May you both live happily ever after.”

THE END

Epilogue

Meria

“What do you think?” Dominick asked. I could feel his jaw move when he spoke, as he rested it on the top of my head.

“I think it is beautiful! I did not know that there were oceans on land!” I gasped, wanting so desperately to wade into the water and float about.

“You want to go in, don't you?”

“What do you think?”

“I think if you dove in there, right now, Gwendolyn might be rather startled.”

“That is true,” I said as Dominick moved to my side, letting go of where he held me around the waist. He bent down and touched the water. It smelled different from what I was used to, a rather strange salt-lessness.

I watched Dominick take off his boots, stockings, roll up his pant legs, and wade in up to his calves in the small ocean.

“Peter loves it when Gwendolyn is startled, because he gets to comfort her. Men love that.”

“Do they?”

“Yes, my mermaid; It is an easy excuse to pull a lady, or a mermaid in my case, in for a hug,” Dominick said with a wide grin. I loved that look on his face, loved his unmarked skin. Not for any other reason than it meant that he was not in constant pain. Not anymore. Dominick bent down and hit the water, sending a spray at me. Gwendolyn squealed from behind me, but I closed my eyes and let the water wet my face. I even licked my lips, then scrunched up my nose.

“What is this?” I asked, wiping at my face and smelling the water. “This is awful.”

“It is water, Meria,” Dominick said with a chuckle, spraying me again. I bent down and took off my shoes and stockings, I could hear Gwendolyn behind us, becoming startled. For the few weeks we had spent in Walden, we had discovered many things. One thing we had discovered was that Gwendolyn Darling was a very proper noble lady. She was not judgemental and unkind, but she was easily rattled, and she had been very sheltered. She did not like it when one evening Dominick and I went swimming, and afterward, we ran through the castle with me in one of his large black shirts, and he was shirtless. She spoke to Peter about it, who spoke to us, and explained that Gwendolyn was rather proper, and it had offended her sense of propriety. She was proper, but she was also one of the kindest people I had ever met. Humans, I learned very quickly, were mostly kind. Mermaids were not as modest as humans, so while taking off my shoes and stockings made Gwendolyn nearly faint, I felt more like myself when I was barefoot.

“This is the strange water you always drink. Where is the salt?”

“It is what we like to call *fresh* water; you know, what I need to survive,” Dominick said. I did not like fresh water, but a swim did sound lovely, as it always did. I placed my stockings and shoes to the side. Humans always wore so much clothing. I turned around, looking for Peter and Gwendolyn. Peter was fanning her, and I called out to him.

“Peter!”

He looked my way and jogged over to me.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Is Gwendolyn okay?”

“She will be fine; she just has to adjust to you two and your *rebellious* ways. She likes you very much, but her mother did teach her to be shocked.”

“Well, you may want to head back to the palace because we are going for a swim.”

“Indeed, thank you!” he said with a laugh. “Hey, did you hear about the princess from Solalune who disappeared? Rumor has it that she is at the Lost Lake.”

“Lost Lake?” I asked.

“It is a lake, somewhere in Solalune. They can not seem to pin down where it is either–rather irresponsible of them,” Dominick said with a chuckle.

“But, last I heard, her brother is sending men in search of the Princess–Princess Odette! It is a great story,” Peter went on.

“Peter loves stories.” Gwendolyn said, coming up beside him with a smile.

“It is true, I love a good tale. Can you imagine? A lost lake, and discovering such a thing?”

“I can imagine that, but do *you* wish to find this princess?”

“No–of course, not,” Peter said with a smile.

“Well, I am going to–” I said, looking at Peter. He needed to leave with Gwendolyn, so she would not panic when I entered the water.

“Gwendolyn, let’s go back to the castle; we should brainstorm ideas about what could happen in a story where there is a lost lake.”

Gwendolyn laughed and nodded. Peter escorted her through the forest, and I waited a few moments.

“Are we safe?” Dominick called from the water.

“I told Peter to go–as we were about to become rather improper.”

“What do you mean, mermaid?” Dominick said, raising his eyebrows up and down, teasingly.

Without another word, I ran into the water and straight for Dominick’s arms. He picked me up, twirled me around, and tossed me. With a splash, I sank under the surface, and while, yes, I did not have a tail, when I entered the water, I could still hold my breath for long periods of time, dive deeper than humans could, and see under water just the same as before. Except, I did not like that kind of water very much, fresh water. It was murky.

I rose to the surface to see Dominick had completely submerged himself as well.

“What do you think of this lake?”

“I am sorry, Dominick, but I do not like it, not very much. It is trying to be a sea, but it is a horrible imposter.”

Dominick chuckled. “Come here–” He took me in his arms.“We are getting married tomorrow,” he said, tenderly, brushing hair from my face.

“Yes, can you believe it? Are we sure everything is ready?” I asked.

“Yes, the ship sets sail at dawn. Finn spoke with your father, mother, and sisters, and they should be out in the harbor, above the sea. Sands is in charge of the crew on board the ship.”

“And your mother, she really will not mind us being gone for a while on a *honeymoon trip,* as you call it.”

“She will miss us. She loves you, probably, just as much as me.”

It was true, the Queen was kinder than I had ever dreamed, taking me in as her own, and even meeting with my own mother. I had spent many afternoons in the palace and in the sea with my mother, too, and getting to know her was like getting to know a piece of myself.

“I am excited. I love our adventures.”

“Yes, but not as many near death experiences this time, okay? This should be a relaxing trip,” Dominick said with a smile.

“I saw those maps you were prepping. You have some adventures in mind–any treasure?”

“I may have a few things planned, but they are surprises, and you should know that you are all the treasure I will ever need,” he said, then reached down to kiss my lips.

“I want you to know, I really do not have kind feelings for this small false sea of horrible fresh water–”

“Lake,” Dominick chuckled.

“Dominick, I do like adventures, but I do prefer the sea, and salt in my water.”

“Well, there is not much salt water on land. I guess we shall have to stick to traveling upon the seas, which I must admit is exactly what I would prefer as well. I just wanted to make sure you had this human experience of a lake. Seems important.”

“Water should always have salt in it.”

“Again, Meria, if a human drank only seawater as you did, they would die. There are stories of men doing so and going mad.”

“So am I a human–completely, or am I still a mermaid just without her tail?”

“Well, you will officially be *my* mermaid tomorrow–and then after that, forever. We can travel all of the seas.”

“For ever and ever.”

One Year Later
Meria

“Three?” Dominick gasped as I cradled our three new babies in my arms. They barely fit, but I was glowing with happiness and pride. I could not wait to bathe them in the sea and see the color of their tails, if they had tails. We were still not sure if they would.

“I told you, mermaids have multiples, and I guess, even though I have no tail, I am still a mermaid. Three, that was why my stomach was so large.”

Dominick sank down beside the bed and reached out his hand to each of the babies’ sweet heads.

“Meria–they are so–”

I looked from our children to Dominick. During that first year of our marriage, his soul’s melody came out more clearly than ever, and I could sense his joy through his song.

“I know–beautiful–precious–incredible,” I said gently.

“All of it, and more,” he said in a reverent whisper. “What will we name them?”

“It is customary for mer to name their children after things within the sea–”

“But you are *Meria*.”

“Yes, it is based off of Mer, it actually means, ‘little mermaid.’”

“It does? You never told me this!” Dominick said with a chuckle as he kissed my cheek, my forehead, and neck.

“Yes, well, I was the youngest–”

“Then I shall call you that more often. You need to rest, my love. Let me take them.”

“I want them near,” I complained.

“No problem,” Dominick said as he stripped off his boots, his socks, his coat, vest, and belt. “I shall join you.”

He walked to the opposite side of our rather large bed and sat down beside me. I passed two of the babies to him, still wanting to hold one, at least. I still could not fathom such joy. I had a family. It was not just

Dominick and me, but we had those three precious lives that we had brought into this world.

“I think we shall name this one *Ocean*,” Dominick said, nodding to the one with light hair in his arms.

“Really?” I asked Dominick with a laugh.

“Why not?”

“I like that name, We need other names, too. I was thinking about *Forest*. It was one of my favorite things on Marren island, and I love the land-forests here in Walden.”

“That is more of a boy's name,” Dominick said.

“And?”

“I guess, I did not ask what they are?” Dominick asked with a laugh.

“Two girls, one boy.”

“Aw, so Forest for the boy; I like that.” Dominick smiled.

“Which two are my daughters? I must get a good look at them.”

“You are holding the girls.”

“Ah–yes, well, this one is *Ocean*–no doubt about that. It appears that with her hair, she will take after her mother, and I am sure she shall have your tail coloring,” he said, kissing the top of his daughter’s head.

“And her?” I asked, motioning to the other. She had dark hair, just like Dominick’s, as did the boy in my arms.

“What about *Sky*? All three of the important things that connect us–the sea, land, and air,” Dominick said, looking at me with a smile.

“Forest, Ocean, and Sky?” I asked. As strange as it may have sounded to some, it felt right. It represented us. I hoped for even more children and had no idea how the other names would be selected, but for those three, those names represented our unique family, for we were a combination of two different worlds.

“Yes, if you like that?”

“I love it.” I shifted from the bed.

“Where are you going?” Dominick asked me as I stood up, a little wobbly from laying in bed for so long.

“I must know, Dominick–if they have tails,” I said.

“Oh, yes, let's find out. Will they be alright?”

“Of course, even if they have no tails, they will love the sea. They will always be at least half connected to it.

We walked with our three priceless babies in our arms. I was still in my nightgown, and Dominick was barefooted with only his pants and shirt on. We were known for our casual appearance, and always heard gasps because of it. The new princesses and prince were with us as we made our way to the water by way of the sandy beach. The babies woke up as soon as we reached the foaming waves. Their eyes were wide and alert.

"This is your home, too–whether or not you have a tail–the sea is also yours," I whispered as Dominick and I sat down in the surf, holding our babies above the waves.

"Ready?" I asked with my heart pounding as waves crashed against us.

"I know they will all take after their mother," Dominick said with a smile. We unwrapped them from their blankets, their small little legs and toes exposed. Then we placed them partially in the water, up to their waists. I squealed with glee as one by one, each of my sweet babies' legs turned into tails. Forest, with a teal tail, just a few shades darker than mine; Sky with a silver tail, which matched the clouds, and then, Ocean, with the exact same tail as me and my mother.

"Our children are beautiful, Meria–so beautiful," Dominick leaned over and kissed me tenderly.

"This life is beautiful, Dominick. Thank you for making all my dreams come true."

"Thank you for being my dream."

Author Note

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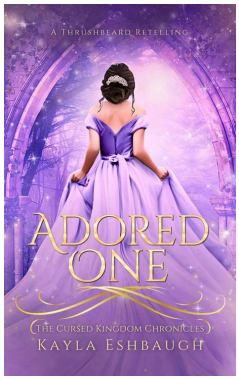

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Thank you so much!

Next Book

Welcome to the ancient land of Terra, where curses run rampant throughout all the kingdoms and where the royalty desperately attempt to break their curses and claim their own happily ever afters.

When Princess Odette's curse takes effect at the Midnight Moon Ball on her twenty-first birthday, she vanishes before her entire kingdom to a magical lake. There, she discovers the true unsettling details of her curse. During the day, she is cursed to live her life as a swan. Each night, when the moonlight touches her wings, she will change back into her true human form.

When men begin to arrive proclaiming to be vying for her heart to break her curse, she becomes hopeless as suitor after suitor comes and she feels nothing for them. All that stands in her way of freedom is for her to fall in love with a man who will be willing to confess his love for her, before a kingdom. Odette only has until the full moon before she remains a swan forever. With time running out and no man catching her attention, she fears she'll never break her curse. Is there something wrong with her? How come she can not fall in love?

Crown Prince Damion of Arcadia knows exactly what he's wanted since he was a boy; he wants Odette as his Queen. Trying as hard as he could to gain her favor, she only ever pushed him away. Damion, who enjoys a challenge, is undeterred and waits patiently until the time is right. When Odette goes missing, he makes it his mission to help find her, and once she is found, he agrees to help save her from her curse. Damion is not going anywhere, not even when she requests that he leave her alone. Maybe teaching her about courting the unworthy men who come to seek her hand, will not only bring Damion closer to Odette, but make her realize what they could have together if she only lets him in.

Moonlit Wings is a Swan Lake retelling and the sixth book in ***The Cursed Kingdom Chronicles****, a series of clean, stand-alone but connected, fairytale retellings. If you enjoy clean romance, adventure, and witty banter, The Cursed Kingdom Chronicles is for you!*

Coming 2025!

Pre-order now on Amazon

Thank you!

Thank you so much for reading my little mermaid retelling! It has always been a favorite story of mine. I can't even tell you how many hours my younger sister and I swam in our little blow-up pool in our backyard, pretending to be mermaids, during the hot summers. I've always loved the ocean, too, and the thought of mermaids being real has always been this deep and exciting thing for me. If I could pick one super power, it would be the ability to go swim the sea and explore without needing to come up for air or without being crushed by the weight of the depths.

While I love the original tale of the little mermaid, it is rather sad in the end when she does not gain the prince's love and the little mermaid turns into sea foam. Sad, right? Well, I knew I could not do that to Meria. She learned many lessons, my favorite being to *trust in herself*. I think it can be hard sometimes to do that, to listen to that inner voice inside of you as it guides you. That inner voice is often called a conscious, and for me, it is God. I feel his whisperings when I need them. Meria, she hears them, too. I also adore how Meria is simple; she just wants a family. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. I am so happy she received the great desires of her heart with her true love, Dominick, at her side along with her three precious babies.

Dominick, what can I say other than his journey means the most to me. We all go through hard things in this life. Sometimes, things are out of our control, and with what knowledge we have, we do the best we can. Dominick tries so hard to do his best under really sad and scary

circumstances. He was wronged over and over again. If there is anyone who deserved a happily ever after, it was him.

I also just love a broody prince, and a pirate, of course!

This is much different from my other books as it is a traveling adventure story. I love the dark lore behind sirens and mermaids. It has always been so interesting to me. When I tackled *the little mermaid*, I decided that I would cover not only the happy sides of what we love about mermaids, but the dark sides as well. How could I do that? Well, I included the two different kinds, a mermaid of light and one of darkness. The Traitor King Falcon comes up in this book, and it is noted that he has done horrible things. The things that transpired both leading up to the Great War as well as during the Great War were really bad. They had to be in order for Ancient Draken to hate humans enough to curse them, right? Yes. So in this book, I thought it was fitting to show another dimension, a darker side during those ancient times in the history of Terra, where things were awful, as well as to help explain why things were so hard for the cursed kingdoms of Terra.

I loved writing this book. With each book in this series, Terra, and the books, themselves, gets bigger. I have introduced more characters in this story, and we can expect that their stories will be coming soon! I am so grateful to all my readers who continue to read my books and support me in so many wonderful ways. I am *so* grateful.

It helps authors, like me, so much if you would consider giving me a review on amazon! Even a star rating is wonderful! I hope to bring you back to the world of Terra soon, as the next book in the series is going to be Odette's story. It is one you will not want to miss!

-Kayla

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my Father-in-heaven, first and foremost. He helps me craft these books into the stories they become. Every character who I craft feels real to me, and I believe that every story plot and every journey my characters take have come as inspiration from Him. I am so grateful for the wonderful blessing it is to write these stories that I am so passionate about.

My Dad, you are amazing. You get all the credit for this one. It was the roughest one, this time around. I was sick, forever, and left for a month out of the country, and my deadlines were insane, and yet, there you were, editing away into the wee hours of the morning! Five oclock! Dad, you are

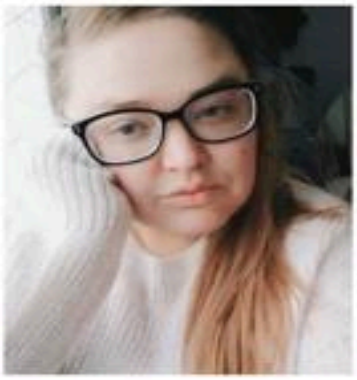
crazy. Not to mention editing in the hospital– You amaze me. Not only that you help me so much, and that is no small thing at all, but also that you support me so much, that you make me feel like what I am doing is not only special, but important. I love doing this with you, and I will always cherish it for the rest of my life. Someday (REALLY FAR FROM NOW) when you are no longer here, I will always have your books to read, and thereby, have you with me. I will also have these books that you have helped me with. I see you on every single page. I am so grateful for your passion for writing and how it was passed down to me. It brings such joy and purpose in my life. Thank you forever, Dad.

To my wonderful friends and beta readers, thank you. I always stress about every book I write, but this one, as I was so sick near the release date, I know I needed extra comfort. Thanks for being so wonderful and helping me so much. You are seriously so amazing.

To my family, Robert, Calin, and Theron, I know it has been crazy over the last few months. I am so grateful that you, Calin, write your own stories, sitting beside me in my office as I write mine. That we challenge each other to achieve our little writing, and in my case this time, editing goals. I am so grateful that you, Theron, for always coming in to sit and talk with me and always complimenting me on whatever I am doing–whether making a cover or talking with me; you are the sweetest. You are also the best at filling up my water bottle with ice water. Why does it always taste better when you do it? Robert, thanks for being my true love and the reason I adore writing love stories.

While Dominick is not you, I am always inspired to write swoony men because *you* made me swoon first. Cheesy? It's okay; we like that here. You make my life feel like I am a princess in a happily ever after, and I just am so incredibly grateful to be married to you. I love you, forever.

Thank you to my readers! I love you guys! I still can not believe that there are so many of you, now! Thank you for giving my books a chance! There are more books coming, and I cannot wait to share them with you soon!



Author Kayla Eshbaugh

Kayla has often been told that her own real-life love story sounds a lot like a romance novel. At the age of sixteen, her brother's best friend told her that they would get married someday, and–spoiler alert–they did! Because of her personal experience, she is a firm believer that you can find true and lasting love while still in your teens, which is why she loves writing in the young adult genre. Kayla currently resides with her husband of fourteen years and their two sons in Pasadena, California. She often shares story ideas with her two sons around the dinner table, writes scene ideas on her phone, types away at her next book in her office, and watches true crime documentaries with her husband, even though she is often afraid of the dark, afterwards. She also reads novels during any spare time she has, even if it is late at night after her kids go to sleep. She loves the beach and gets her best ideas for stories while she is at the beach or when she is camping in her favorite spots. Kayla loves happily-ever-afters, along with a bit of magic, which is the reason that in her stories, you can be assured to find both!